

# WARRIORS

## MAPLESHADE'S VENGEANCE



SHORT STORY  
EBOOK  
EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# WARRIORS

MAPLESHADE'S  
VENGEANCE

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**HARPER**

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## DEDICATION

*For the members of FacebookClan, with great affection*

*Special thanks to Victoria Holmes*

## ALLEGIANCES

	<b>THUNDERCLAN</b>
LEADER	<b>OAKSTAR</b> —sturdy brown tom with amber eyes
DEPUTY	<b>BEETAIL</b> —dark brown striped tabby tom
MEDICINE CAT	<b>RAVENWING</b> —small black tom with blue eyes
WARRIORS	(toms and she-cats without kits) <b>MAPLESHADE</b> —thick-furred orange-and-white she-cat with amber eyes <b>DEERDAPPLE</b> —silver-and-black tabby she-cat <b>APPRENTICE, NETTLEPAW</b> <b>FRECKLEWISH</b> —speckled golden-furred she-cat with dark amber eyes <b>BLOOMHEART</b> —gray tabby tom <b>SEEDPELT</b> —light brown-and-white tom <b>THRUSHTALON</b> —light brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE	<b>NETTLEPAW</b> —ginger tom
ELDER	(former warriors and queens, now retired) <b>RABBITFUR</b> —gray tabby tom
	<b>RIVERCLAN</b>
LEADER	<b>DARKSTAR</b> —black she-cat
DEPUTY	<b>SPIKETAIL</b> —dark gray tom
WARRIORS	<b>RAINFALL</b> —skinny black tom <b>APPLEDUSK</b> —pale brown tom with green eyes

APPRENTICE

MEDICINE CAT

MEDICINE CAT  
WARRIORS

**APPRENTICE, PERCHPAW**

REEDSHINE—dark orange she-cat

MILKFUR—white she-cat

SPLASHFOOT—pale gray tom

EELTAIL—gray-and-black tabby  
she-cat

PERCHPAW—thick-furred gray tom

**SHADOWCLAN**

SLOEFUR—black tom

**WINDCLAN**

LARKWING—gray tabby tom

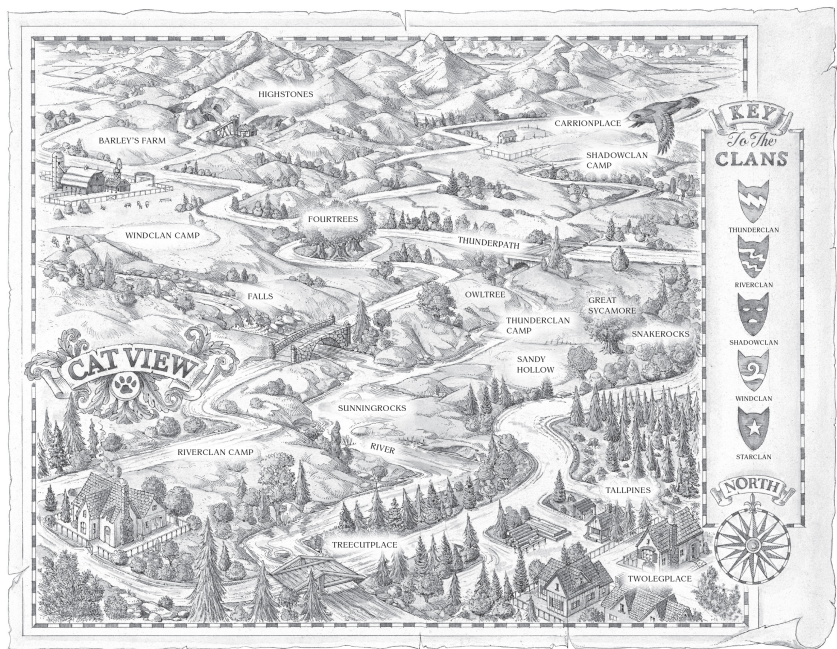
SWIFTFLIGHT—pale gray tabby  
tom

MIDGEPELT—patch-furred brown  
tom

**CATS OUTSIDE CLANS**

MYLER—black-and-white tom

MAPS









## CHAPTER 1



*"Steady on, Mapleshade! You just trod on my tail!"* The WindClan warrior jerked away with a hiss.

"Sorry, Swiftflight," Mapleshade apologized over her shoulder as she plunged deeper into the throng of cats. The light of the full moon turned all their pelts to silver, and fur tickled Mapleshade's nose. Above her, Oakstar's voice echoed around the trunks of the four gigantic oak trees.

"My warriors tracked the adders to their nest at Snakerocks and blocked the hole with stones," the ThunderClan leader reported. "Thanks to their courage, no adders have since been seen in our territory."

"They were lucky not to get bitten," grunted a ShadowClan elder near Mapleshade's ear.

"Too right," agreed her Clanmate. "Remember when Marshpaw trod on an adder on his first patrol? That was a bad way to die."

The first cat shrugged. "I've seen worse."

Mapleshade rolled her eyes. *Trust ShadowClan cats to get competitive about deaths they have watched.* She dodged around a rock and emerged among a cluster of RiverClan cats. Instantly pelts bristled and she felt eyes burn into her.

"There may be a truce," snarled the black warrior Rainfall. "But don't push your luck, ThunderClan mouse dung."

Mapleshade ducked her head. "I mean no harm," she mewed. "I'm not staying."

"Good," growled a cat she couldn't see.

Mapleshade forced her hair to lie flat as she wove among the hostile warriors. She couldn't blame RiverClan for being angry. ThunderClan had triumphed in the last clash over Sunningrocks; defeat was the bitterest wound of all.

"Remember what happened to Birchface and Flowerpaw," Rainfall murmured in her ear, so close that Mapleshade could feel the heat of his fish-breath. "Those rocks belong to us, and we'll kill as many of your Clanmates as we need to until you give them up."

Mapleshade stumbled as a memory seared through her brain: Appledusk, a light brown RiverClan warrior with piercing green eyes, striking Birchface so hard that the ThunderClan cat lost his footing and slipped from the very top of Sunningrocks. He landed with a splash in the swollen river. His apprentice Flowerpaw leaped in after him and struggled to keep Birchface's head out of the water but the current was too strong and they were swept downstream into the half-submerged crossing rocks. For one terrible moment, dark tabby and dappled gray heads rose above the surface, screeching in fear, then both vanished into the tumbling foam. Their bodies were found just beyond the stones, washed up on the ThunderClan shore as if they were making a last desperate effort to go home.

Mapleshade swallowed a burst of rage at the warriors around her. Why did RiverClan insist on fighting over a bunch of rocks that were clearly on ThunderClan's territory? She lowered her head and pushed her way through the knot of hostile cats. She made it to the edge of the hollow where the shadows clustered more densely, dark enough to hide among. Suddenly a pale brown shape loomed in front of her, and Mapleshade's nostrils flared at the scent of fish. She looked up, her heart pounding.

"What are you doing here?" hissed Appledusk. His long front claws caught the moonlight as he sank them into the grass.

Mapleshade's words seemed to be stuck in her throat. She stared into the RiverClan warrior's holly-colored eyes and tried to breathe normally. She wondered if any of her Clanmates were watching.

Appledusk took a step closer and lowered his head until his muzzle brushed the tip of Mapleshade's ear. "You must know how dangerous it is for you to be here. What would happen if your Clanmates saw you talking to me?"

Mapleshade leaned forward until her cheek pressed against Appledusk's feather-soft chest fur. "I had to speak with you," she murmured. "It's been too long. I waited for you at the sycamore tree every night, but you never came."

The tom's breath warmed the back of her neck. "I know," he purred. "But since the battle, we've doubled our border patrols, even after dark. I can't cross the river without being spotted." He took a step back, and Mapleshade felt a rush of cold air on her pelt. "I'll try to get across at new moon. Things might have calmed down by then."

"If only you hadn't killed Birchface," Mapleshade whispered. "Of all the cats to lose in the battle, it had to be Oakstar's son!"

She felt Appledusk stiffen beneath his pelt. "It was an accident," he growled. "I never meant for him to fall into the river."

Mapleshade closed her eyes. "That's not the way my Clanmates see it. They blame you for both of our losses."

"Then they are fools." Appledusk shuddered, then relaxed. "But Sunningrocks has always made our Clans a little mouse-brained." He licked the top of Mapleshade's head. "Thank StarClan you didn't get hurt in the battle."

Mapleshade gazed up at him. *Oh my precious warrior. I love you with all my heart.* "There's something you need to know," she mewled.

Appledusk was looking over her head, toward the pool of moonlight where his Clanmates stood. "Can't it wait?"

"I don't think so." Mapleshade took a deep breath. "I'm expecting your kits."

There was a flash of green as Appledusk opened his eyes wide. "Are you

sure?"

Mapleshade nodded. The RiverClan warrior curled his tail over his back. "I'm going to be a father," he purred. "Incredible." He tipped his head to one side. "But these kits will be half-Clan. Half *RiverClan*. How will your Clanmates feel about that?"

"They won't know," Mapleshade answered. She noticed Appledusk flinch. "At least, not at first," she went on. "I will raise them as ThunderClan until they have been fully accepted. Then every cat will be able to cope with the truth. Why should it matter that their father lives in a different Clan?"

The fur on Appledusk's shoulders twitched. "You have great faith in your Clanmates," he murmured.

"No, I have faith in StarClan, and in the warrior code."

"You think StarClan approves of what we are doing?" Appledusk narrowed his eyes.

"I think our warrior ancestors know that our Clans need kits and we are providing them. How can our innocent kits not have their blessing? They will grow up to be fine warriors, loyal to ThunderClan and RiverClan equally." Mapleshade turned away before Appledusk could say anything else. "I must return to my Clanmates before they come looking for me. Perhaps it's best if we don't see each other again until after the kits have come." She looked back over her shoulder. "But I will be thinking of you every day, my love."

As she padded into the shadows that ringed the hollow, Mapleshade heard rapid paw steps. "Appledusk! There you are! I've been looking for you!" Mapleshade stopped, hoping her white patches weren't glowing in the moonlight. A dark orange she-cat was pressing herself against Appledusk's shoulder. "One of the ShadowClan elders is telling a story about a cat that swallowed a live frog," she mewled. "Come and listen, it's really funny."

With a worried glance at the shadows where Mapleshade crouched, Appledusk followed the she-cat back to the cluster of cats. The orange warrior curled her tail until it was resting on Appledusk's back.

Mapleshade curled her lip. *Stay away from him, Reedshine. He's mine! These kits will make sure of that!*

"Mapleshade, wake up!" A small ginger face poked through the branches that sheltered the warriors' den. "Beetail wants you to go on the dawn patrol. You're late!"

"All right, Nettlepaw, I'm coming." Mapleshade heaved herself to her paws. Last night she had felt the kits stirring inside her for the first time. *Is it because your father knows about you now?* She craned her head around to lick the rumpled fur on her flank, then pushed her way out of the den. She felt strangely heavy, unbalanced by her swollen belly.

The air in the clearing was still and cold, tasting of old leaves and damp earth. The little orange apprentice bounced around Mapleshade. "Hurry up! When did you get so slow?"

Mapleshade flicked him lightly with her tail. "What would Deerdapple do if you spoke like that to her, hmmm?"

Nettlepaw looked down at the ground at the mention of his mentor. "She'd probably make me pick ticks off Rabbitfur for a moon," he admitted.

Mapleshade purred, too full of joy about her kits to be short-tempered. "You're lucky that I won't punish you, then. Now, off you go and let me speak to Beetail."

The apprentice scampered off with a squeak. Mapleshade headed over to the ThunderClan deputy, who was standing beside the entrance to Oakstar's den. The dark brown tabby nodded as Mapleshade approached.

"I'd like you to join the dawn patrol, please," he meowed. "Frecklewish is leading it."

"Actually, there's something I need to tell you," Mapleshade began. Her paws tingled. "I won't be able to carry out my usual duties for a while. I'm expecting kits."

Beetail blinked. "Oh. Right. I . . . er . . . wasn't expecting that. Well, you must only do what you feel up to. Does Oakstar know?"

"Not yet. Why don't I help out in the camp today?" Mapleshade suggested. She couldn't resist glancing at the curve of her belly. "I could fetch some soaked moss for the elders, if you like."

"That would be great," mewed Beetail. He shifted his paws. "And, er, congratulations."

"Thank you," purred Mapleshade. "It's wonderful news, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Beetail meowed. "And these kits . . . their father . . . ?"

"I will be raising them alone," Mapleshade answered firmly.

The deputy looked startled for a moment, then dipped his head. "May StarClan light your path, and the path of your kits."

Still rumbling with delight, Mapleshade turned and headed back across the clearing. Since she wasn't needed on the dawn patrol, she could go back to her nest until the rest of the Clan stirred. She knew she had to save her strength for when the kits arrived.

She was dozing in dappled sunlight when she was roused by paws thrumming outside the den. Frecklewish burst in, her speckled golden fur fluffed up and her eyes sparkling. "Beetail told me your news!" she purred. "I'm so happy for you!"

Mapleshade sat up and curled her thick white tail over her paws. "Thank you." *You see, Appledusk? My Clanmates will only be delighted to have new kits in the camp!*

Frecklewish stood beside Mapleshade's nest looking uncharacteristically shy. "Beetail also said that you would be raising these kits alone," she mewed.

Mapleshade tensed. She had not anticipated questions about her kits' father so soon.

Frecklewish looked down at the floor of the den. "Is . . . is that because their father is dead?" She lifted her gaze, and Mapleshade almost winced at the blaze of hope in her eyes. "Are these Birchface's kits?" Frecklewish whispered. "Is my brother going to live on through you?"

The air in the warriors' den was suddenly so thick that Mapleshade couldn't catch her breath. *Is StarClan offering me a way for my kits to be accepted by their Clanmates? I can't lie, not if I want them to know the truth later.* She stared at Frecklewish, unable to speak.

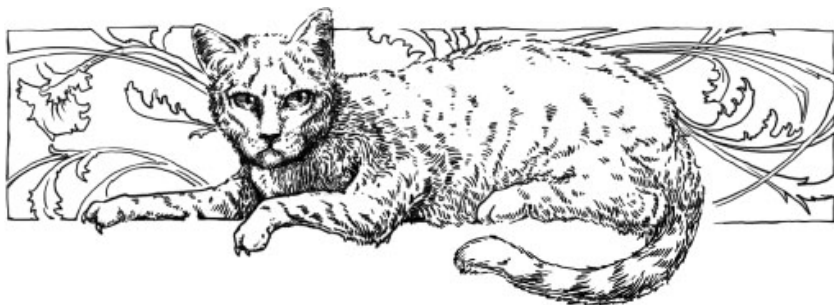
The golden she-cat didn't seem to need a response from Mapleshade. She nodded slowly, and the light in her eyes burned even more brightly. "I'm right, aren't I? Oh, thank StarClan! And thank *you*, Mapleshade. You will never know how much this means to me. I . . . I thought I would never be happy again after Birchface was killed in that terrible battle. But now I can help you to raise his

kits, teach them that their father was a true ThunderClan hero, watch them take his place in the Clan . . .” She broke off and stepped gently into the nest until she was crouched beside Mapleshade. She stretched out her front paw until it rested on Mapleshade’s orange-and-white flank. “I hope Birchface can see us,” she murmured.

Mapleshade took a deep breath. *I have not lied out loud. This was all Frecklewish’s doing. But I cannot turn down this chance to have my kits welcomed with the love they deserve. Appledusk will understand that I have to put ThunderClan first, for now at least.* She unfurled her tail until it was resting on Frecklewish’s shoulder.

“You have answered my prayers, Frecklewish,” she mewed softly. “My kits and I are no longer alone.”

Frecklewish’s dark amber gaze shone back at her. “Never,” she vowed. “These kits will be the best thing ever to happen in our Clan.”



## CHAPTER 2



*Oh StarClan, make it stop!* Mapleshade writhed in agony and sank her claws into the dried moss.

“Relax,” Ravenwing instructed, placing one paw on her rippling flank.

*You try to relax with this happening to you,* Mapleshade wanted to screech at the medicine cat, but she barely had enough breath to survive the spasm that wracked her body. She clenched her jaw and resisted the urge to sink her teeth into Ravenwing’s thick-furred black leg.

“It’s a tom!” gasped Frecklewish. “Oh, he’s magnificent!”

Ravenwing turned to look. Mapleshade sprawled in the nest with her eyes closed, trying not to think about the pain yet to come. Something wet and squirming was shoved against her muzzle. She opened her mouth to protest—and smelled the sweetest scent she had ever known. She lifted her head and blinked down at the dark brown bundle of slick fur beside her. *Oh Appledusk, you have a son. And he’s beautiful!*

“Lick him, Mapleshade,” Ravenwing mewed. “It will help him to breathe.”

For a moment Mapleshade wanted to tell the other cats to get out, to leave her alone with this tiny precious creature. Nothing would ever be as special as this heartbeat, when she met her first kit. Then her body buckled under another wave of pain and she cried out. Ravenwing hastily pulled the kit away. “You take him, Frecklewish,” he ordered.

“Gladly,” came the she-cat’s mew. “Come here, little one. Let’s get you clean and dry.”

Mapleshade tried to say that she could take care of her own kits but the spasm grew stronger and suddenly there was another kit lying beside her, his mouth wide open in a soundless mew, his fur patched with ginger and white like his mother’s.

“Another tom,” Ravenwing announced. “You’re doing great, Mapleshade.” He ran his paws along her body. “One more, and that’s it. Come on now, stay focused.”

An irresistible longing to be alone with her kits gave Mapleshade a fresh surge of strength and the final kit slithered out almost at once.

"A she-cat!" purred Ravenwing. "Smaller than her brothers, but in excellent shape. Your turn to take over, Mapleshade." He nudged all three kits into the curve of Mapleshade's belly. She propped herself up and twisted around to gaze at them in astonishment. *I did it, Appledusk! Two sons and a daughter!*

"They are gorgeous," Frecklewish whispered, her voice husky with emotion.

Ravenwing nodded. "You did a great job, Mapleshade. We'll leave you alone to rest, but I'll come back with some herbs for you after sunhigh. Do you feel okay?" There was a flash of concern in his dark blue eyes, and Mapleshade felt a surge of sympathy toward the young medicine cat. He had been in sole charge of ThunderClan for just two moons since the death of Oatspeckle, and this was one of the first deliveries he'd had to supervise.

"I couldn't be better," she told him. Her throat felt dry and sore. "Could I just have some water, please?"

"I'll fetch it," Frecklewish offered, hopping out of the nest and vanishing through the brambles.

Ravenwing watched her leave. "You have made her feel as if life is worth living again," he commented. "She took the loss of her brother hard."

Mapleshade buried her muzzle in the soft, damp fur of her kits. "These kits are my gift to the whole of ThunderClan," she murmured. "I will thank StarClan for them every day for the rest of my life."

The medicine cat touched her lightly with the tip of his tail. "And ThunderClan thanks you," he meowed.

*As will RiverClan,* Mapleshade added silently. *The feud over Sunningrocks will be forgotten when the Clans realize that they share these perfect warriors!*

"Are you receiving visitors?" rumbled a voice at the entrance to the nursery.

"Of course! Come in," Mapleshade mewed somewhat breathlessly while trying to coax the she-kit off the top of her head. At three sunrises old, they astonished Mapleshade with their ability to be all over the nursery at once, while at the same time constantly nuzzling at her belly.

Oakstar's broad dark brown face appeared through the branches. "Hello, little ones," he purred.

The she-kit jumped at the sound of his voice. Releasing her tiny claws from Mapleshade's ear, she slithered onto the moss with a thump.

"This is Oakstar, the leader of ThunderClan," Mapleshade told her kits. She tried to nudge them into a line. But their eyes were still closed and the smell of a different cat was just too much to resist, so all three tottered toward Oakstar with their stubby tails held straight up, mouths open in high-pitched mews.

Oakstar gently herded them back to Mapleshade with his paw. "I'm not just their leader," he reminded her. "Birchface was my son. These cats are my kin." His eyes clouded with emotion as he stared down at the kits. "If only Birchface could see them."

Mapleshade's fur felt hot and prickly. "I'm sure he's watching from StarClan," she murmured. Beside her, the kits started nuzzling at her belly and fell silent as they began to suck.

"My son was a great warrior," Oakstar went on. "The Clan is honored if his

spirit lives on through his kits."

There was a rustle of bramble fronds and Frecklewish appeared with a vole in her jaws. She set it down beside the nest. "I took first pick of the fresh-kill pile for you," she told Mapleshade with pride.

"Thank you," Mapleshade meowed hoarsely. She wondered if it would be rude to ask Oakstar to leave. His scrutiny was making her more and more nervous.

Frecklewish turned to Oakstar. "Aren't the kits perfect?" she purred. "I can see Birchface so clearly in each of them!"

Mapleshade glanced at the tiny bodies in the curve of her belly. Apart from the tom who was patch-furred like her, they were the exact soft brown shade of Appledusk's fur. Birchface had been a dark brown tabby, almost black. Her heart pounding, she waited for Oakstar to comment but instead he asked if she had chosen names for them.

Mapleshade used her tail to indicate each kit without disturbing them. "I thought Larchkit for the brown tom, Patchkit for his brother, and Petalkit for their sister." She paused as her tail-tip rested on the tiny she-kit. She was the fluffiest of all and her ears were so small they barely peeked out of the fur on her head. Mapleshade felt as if her heart would burst with love. *If only you could see them like this, Appledusk!*

"Excellent names," Oakstar meowed.

"Didn't you want to name one of them after Birchface?" Frecklewish asked. She sounded disappointed.

Mapleshade didn't lift her gaze from her kits. "I want them each to be their own warrior," she explained quietly. "Not an echo of a cat that has gone before."

To her relief Oakstar purred. "ThunderClan is blessed to have you as a queen, Mapleshade. I look forward to watching these kits grow up."

"I can't wait to see RiverClan's faces when they hear about them at the next Gathering," Frecklewish hissed.

Mapleshade's heart began to beat faster. "I wish I could be there to see that, too. Make sure you tell them that I've had three perfect, strong kits who are going to be great warriors!" she told Frecklewish. "Especially Appledusk. Tell him first."

The pale ginger she-cat blinked. "Why would I speak to that mange-fur?" she growled. "He killed Birchface!"

"Exactly!" mewed Mapleshade hurriedly. "He needs to know that ThunderClan is stronger than ever, thanks to these kits."

Frecklewish nodded. "Of course." She unsheathed her front claws and sank them into the mossy litter on the floor of the nursery. "Our enemies have even more reason to fear us now!"

Oakstar curled his lip, showing a glint of yellow teeth. "It will do no harm for RiverClan to know that they may have robbed us of two fine cats, but thanks to Birchface, there will be three more warriors ready to defend what is rightfully ours."

Mapleshade felt a stir of alarm. "The warrior code says we must show mercy to the warriors we have defeated," she pointed out.

"Appledusk didn't show any mercy to Birchface and Flowerpaw!" Frecklewish hissed, lashing her tail.

*It was an accident!* Mapleshade wanted to shriek. *Birchface fell! Flowerpaw should never have followed him into the river!* But she controlled herself. She

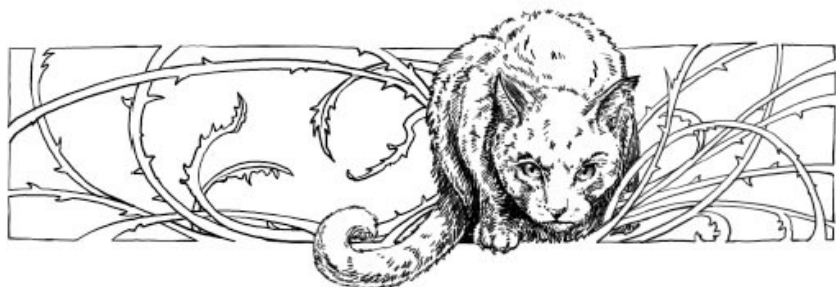


couldn't let Frecklewish suspect she had any sympathy for Appledusk. Not yet.

Oakstar was starting to back out of the nursery. "Right now, the most important thing is that Mapleshade's kits are safe and well," he meowed. There was a grim note to his voice that made Mapleshade's fur stand up. "We will raise them to be great warriors like their father," Oakstar vowed, "and let them avenge his death when they are ready." He turned and vanished into the clearing, leaving the bramble wall trembling.

Frecklewish bent over the furry little bodies and touched her muzzle lightly to each squirming rump. "They are my brother's gift to the Clan," she murmured. "And the most precious creatures in the whole forest!"

Mapleshade fought down the urge to bat Frecklewish away. *These are my kits, not yours!* She knew that the ginger she-cat's friendship would go a long way toward her kits being loved by all of ThunderClan. By the time the kits were ready to be apprenticed, the truth about who their father really was would be unable to shake the loyalty of their woodland Clanmates. Even Oakstar would understand, once he valued the kits for themselves rather than any legacy they might carry. *And once RiverClan gets to know them, those cats will feel the same!*



### CHAPTER 3



*“Watch this, Larchkit!”* Wrinkling her muzzle in concentration, Petalkit gripped the bundle of dry moss in her jaws and shook it violently.

Her brother grabbed the moss from her and tossed it across the clearing. Both kits scrambled after it, Petalkit winning by a nose. She flopped down on top of the moss. “Mine!” she declared.

“Don’t you want to join in?” Mapleshade asked Patchkit, who was lying in the curve of her belly. His fur matched hers so perfectly that it was impossible to tell where one stopped and the other began. “It looks like they’re having fun.”

Her son shook his head. “I’m fine here,” he mewed. He snuggled in a little closer. “You need me to keep you warm, don’t you?” His green eyes blinked anxiously at her.

Mapleshade stifled a purr of laughter. She could barely feel his tiny body against hers. It was a rare cloud-free day in the rainwashed leaf-fall, and the sunbeams were just strong enough to bring cats out of their dens to bask, though there was a chill in the ground that warned of leaf-bare just around the corner.

“You’re doing a great job,” she told Patchkit. “I might have to share you with the elders to stop them getting cold.”

Patchkit’s green eyes opened wide in alarm. “No! I want to stay with you forever and ever! Even when I’m an apprentice!”

Mapleshade nuzzled the top of his head. “That won’t be for another four moons, little one. By then you’ll be so big and strong, you’ll be glad to leave the nursery and start your warrior training!”

“No I won’t,” muttered Patchkit, burying his face in her chest fur. “I never want to leave you.”

Petalkit and Larchkit were standing side by side, looking at the moss.

“You’ve ripped it to pieces!” Larchkit protested. “It doesn’t roll away now, look.” He prodded the pile of dusty brown shreds with his paw.

Petalkit shrugged. “It was trying to escape and I caught it!”

One of the elders, a gray tabby named Rabbitfur, padded stiffly over to the

kits. "Looks like she's killed it," he observed. "Want to play a different game?"

"Yes please!" mewed Larchkit.

Rabbitfur used his front paw to roll a small stone into the middle of the clearing. Then he nudged a twig with his nose until it lay a bit less than a fox-length from the stone. Maplesshade propped herself up to watch.

"I want you to stand by this stick," Rabbitfur meowed, pointing with his tail, "and pounce on that stone without touching the ground in between."

Petalkit blinked. "But that's almost at the other side of the clearing!"

"I'd have to grow wings to jump that far!" mewed Larchkit.

"Don't be mouse-brained," snorted Rabbitfur. "Your father could leap twice that distance, and land on the smallest leaf without disturbing a fly."

Maplesshade felt a stir of alarm in her belly. Beside her, Patchkit sat up and tipped his head to one side. "Rabbitfur's really bossy!" he squeaked.

Petalkit was crouching down beside the twig, wiggling her rump as she braced herself for the jump. With a grunt, she heaved herself forward, but her hind paw caught on the stick. She lurched sideways, snapping the twig, and sprawled on the ground at Rabbitfur's paws.

"Humph!" he muttered. "Try again."

This time Petalkit managed to clear the stick but she barely made half of the distance to the stone. Rabbitfur shook his head. "Your turn, Larchkit," he rumbled.

The little brown tom looked very determined as he hunkered down. He sprang into the air, almost as high as Rabbitfur's ears, but came down almost vertically, like an acorn falling from a tree.

Rabbitfur had to dodge out of the way to avoid being squashed. "Watch out!" He gave his chest fur a couple of licks. "Birchface managed to pounce without flattening any cats," he grunted.

Maplesshade couldn't listen to any more. She jumped out, dislodging Patchkit, who rolled over with a squawk, and trotted into the clearing. "Perhaps they take after me, Rabbitfur," she meowed. "I can't pounce, either."

The old tom narrowed his eyes. "You're not that bad," he rasped. "I can't believe any kit of Birchface would be heavy-footed as a badger." He glanced at Petalkit, who was licking the paw that had caught on the stick.

The blood was roaring in Maplesshade's ears now. "I will not have my kits judged before they have even begun their warrior training!" she hissed. "Patchkit, come here! We're going for a walk in the forest!"

Patchkit scampered over, but Petalkit was pouting. "I want to stay here and practice jumping," she mewed. "I want to be as good as Birchface."

Rabbitfur looked pleased. "You should be very proud of who your father was," he purred. "I remember the time we were stalking a pheasant over by Twolegplace. I'd never seen a bird that big, but Birchface was fearless—and so quiet, I couldn't hear him over the breeze in the leaves!"

"I think the kits need to stretch their legs outside the camp," Maplesshade meowed, interrupting Rabbitfur's memories. "Come on, you three! No arguments, Petalkit."

Patchkit's green eyes—so like Appledusk's, they made Maplesshade's heart flip over—were huge. "Are we allowed outside? I thought we had to stay in the camp until we are old enough to be apprentices."

"I'll be with you so you'll be perfectly safe," Mapleshade told him. Oakstar and Beetail were out on patrol and Frecklewish had gone to check the barrier of stones at Snakerocks. Rabbitfur had wandered back to his sunny spot outside the elders' den. Apart from some dozing cats, the clearing was empty. No one would take much notice if she took the kits out.

Suddenly Mapleshade couldn't bear to be in the ravine another moment. With a whisk of her tail, she trotted toward the tunnel through the gorse. The kits bundled after her, chirping with excitement.

"I'm going to catch a badger!" Larchkit boasted.

"I'm going to watch that badger eat you first!" retorted Petalkit.

Patchkit was running at Mapleshade's heels. "Don't let a badger eat me!" he whimpered.

Mapleshade paused beside the tunnel entrance and turned to lick Patchkit's ears. "I'll never let anything bad happen to you," she promised. With one more glance to check that they weren't being scrutinized, she ushered her kits into the branches.

"Ow, it's prickly!" squeaked Petalkit.

"Don't stop," Mapleshade urged. With a rapid beat of paws on hard earth, the kits burst out of the tunnel and stopped dead, staring around.

"Wow, outside of the camp is really big!" breathed Larchkit.

"It's even bigger at the top of the ravine," Mapleshade meowed. She nudged her kits toward the path that led up to the trees. Her fur prickled at the thought of being seen by a returning patrol.

The kits scrambled up the slope, Petalkit in the lead. They looked even tinier among the tree trunks, the towering oaks and beeches that overhung the ravine. Mapleshade hurried them along a little-used path beneath dense ferns; the kits wanted to stop and sniff every leaf, every mark on the ground, but Mapleshade kept them moving, ducking beneath the sweet-smelling fronds and hoping the fern scent would cover their tracks.

The undergrowth began to thin out, and the sound of splashing water drifted through the trees. Larchkit pricked his ears. "What's that?" he mewed. As he tried to peer through the stalks, he stumbled over a fallen twig and landed on his nose. Mapleshade whisked him back to his paws before he could let out a wail. *I'm glad Rabbitfur didn't see that*, she thought. She couldn't deny that these kits were clumsier than their ThunderClan kin.

Patchkit had kept going while Mapleshade picked up his brother, and Mapleshade heard his sudden squeak of surprise. "Water! Water everywhere, look!"

His littermates bundled forward to stand beside him at the edge of the bracken. Mapleshade joined them, and looked out at the dazzling brightness of the river as it flowed past, swift and sparkling.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Petalkit whispered.

"Where did it come from?" mewed Larchkit.

Mapleshade thought for a moment. "I don't really know," she admitted. "Farther upstream is a deep gorge beside WindClan's territory —"

"Can we go there?" Petalkit demanded.

Mapleshade shook her head. "No, little one. It's too far for you to walk today. But one day you'll see it, I promise."

Patchkit, usually so timid and happy to let his littermates try everything first, tottered over the stones to the edge of the water.

"Be careful!" Mapleshade warned.

Her son turned to look at her, his eyes shining and droplets of water glinting on his whiskers. "It's okay," he mewed. "Watch!"

Before Mapleshade could stop him, he launched himself forward and slipped into the water. For one heartstopping moment, he vanished, then his ginger-and-white face bobbed up on the surface. "Look at me!" he squealed.

Larchkit and Petalkit raced down the shore and plunged in. For a few strides their little paws dug into the pebbles while the water lapped their fluffy bellies, then they were swimming through the rolling water.

Mapleshade felt a burst of love like the sun coming out. *Oh Appledusk! Our kits are half RiverClan, for sure!*

Patchkit reached a branch sticking out of the water and hauled himself onto it. Water streamed from his pelt, leaving it as glossy as a crow's feathers. He looked no bigger than a mouse with his fur flattened to his sides, and his flanks heaved as he caught his breath. Mapleshade felt a jolt of concern.

"Are you okay?" she called.

Patchkit nodded, still panting too hard to speak. Mapleshade paced up and down on the shore. She hated the idea of getting her paws wet, but she wasn't sure if Patchkit had enough strength to swim back on his own. The other kits were playing hide-and-seek in a clump of reeds close by the shore. "Larchkit, Petalkit, go help your brother!" she meowed.

Suddenly the rushes on the far shore rustled and a dark gray head appeared. Mapleshade froze. It was Spiketail, the RiverClan deputy. In the middle of the river, Patchkit slumped on the branch, his cheek resting on the slick bark.

"What is that kit doing?" growled Spiketail. He stepped onto the shore, the fur along his spine bristling.

Mapleshade opened her mouth to speak but two more warriors were emerging from the rushes beside Spiketail.

"Is ThunderClan sending their youngest cats to invade us?" asked Milkfur, her white pelt glowing against the stones.

The third cat met Mapleshade's gaze across the river. From this distance, his green eyes were unreadable. "I think one kit is hardly a threat to our territory," he meowed. "I'll return him to where he belongs." He waded into the water, his pale brown fur turning black as he slid beneath the surface.

"Larchkit, Petalkit, come here!" Mapleshade hissed. The kits waded toward her, looking scared.

"Is that RiverClan warrior going to catch us?" Petalkit squeaked.

Mapleshade watched Appledusk's head bob steadily closer to the branch. "No," she mewed. "You're safe, don't worry."

Appledusk mewed something to Patchkit, too quietly for Mapleshade to hear. Patchkit slithered down the branch and into the water. The RiverClan warrior steadied him with one paw, then began to propel him toward the ThunderClan shore. Mapleshade realized that the other kits were trembling from cold and she bent her head to lick their fur.

"Are we in trouble?" Larchkit mewed.

"Hush, everything's fine," Mapleshade murmured between licks.

Appledusk waded out of the river with Patchkit dangling from his jaws. He set the kit down on the stones and nudged him to his feet. "I think this one's worn out from all that swimming," he commented. His eyes burned into Mapleshade's. "You took a risk, bringing them this close to our boundary."

"I wanted to show them the river," Mapleshade meowed. She angled her body so that the kits were bundled behind her, out of earshot. She could hear Larchkit asking Patchkit what it had been like to swim so far out.

Appledusk leaned forward until his muzzle was almost touching Mapleshade's cheek. "They are wonderful," he breathed. "Strong and brave, and as confident as any RiverClan cat in the water. I am so proud of you." He straightened up and raised his voice. "I don't want to see you or these kits anywhere near the river again," he meowed. The longing in his eyes told a different story.

Mapleshade bowed her head. "Of course, Appledusk. Thank you for bringing Patchkit back."

Appledusk glanced once more at the kits, then headed back into the water.

"Those kits are not old enough to be out of the nursery!" Milkfur called across the river. "What were you thinking of, bringing them here? They could have drowned!"

"You may have won Sunningrocks, but the river still belongs to us," yowled Spiketail. "Appledusk has been merciful this time, but from now on, stay away from our territory."

Mapleshade herded the kits into the bracken. They were bouncing on their paws—even Patchkit, whose fur was fluffing up like thistledown as it dried.

"That was the best thing ever!" squeaked Larchkit.

"When can we come here again?" Petalkit asked. "Swimming is way more fun than jumping!"

"I swam the farthest, didn't I?" mewed Patchkit proudly.

Suddenly a dark shape blocked the path. Mapleshade looked up and met Ravenwing's searching blue gaze. The medicine cat glanced down at the kits. "What were they doing in the river?" he asked.

Mapleshade's paws started to tingle. "Did . . . did you see them?" she whispered.

Ravenwing nodded. "I saw *everything*. What's going on, Mapleshade?"

Before Mapleshade could reply, the kits tumbled over themselves to tell him about their adventure.

"A RiverClan warrior had to save Patchkit—" mewed Larchkit.

"He did not! I was just resting!" Patchkit interrupted crossly.

"It's fine, no one was in any danger," Mapleshade meowed as Ravenwing narrowed his eyes.

"The RiverClan cat was really nice!" squeaked Patchkit. "He said I was very brave, and a really good swimmer!"

"Did he?" mewed Ravenwing. "What else did he say?" He took a step closer.

Mapleshade curled her tail around the kits. "Come on, little ones, time to go home."

Ravenwing didn't move out of the way. "I've seen an omen, Mapleshade," he murmured. "I wonder if you know anything about it?"

There was something in his voice that made Mapleshade's fur prick. "Why would I know anything about an omen? I'm not a medicine cat."

Ravenwing stared at her without blinking. "A tiny stream appeared in my den, in a place where no stream has run before. It carried with it three pieces of water reed." He swept his paw over the ground as if he was tracing the path of the rivulet. "Water reed doesn't grow in ThunderClan territory," he went on. "It doesn't belong inside our boundaries. Do you understand?"

Mapleshade shrugged. "There's been so much rain this leaf-fall, bits and pieces must be washing all over the place." She tried to keep her voice light but there was a cold, heavy feeling in her belly, as if she had swallowed a stone from the river.

Ravenwing watched the kits play with an acorn, shuffling it from one to the other with their paws. "I think this omen means that the river has washed three strange cats into ThunderClan—three cats who don't belong there."

Mapleshade's heart was pounding so hard, she could hardly breathe. "What are you trying to say?" she whispered.

Ravenwing gazed at her, and suddenly he didn't seem like a young, inexperienced cat anymore. Knowledge glittered in his eyes like frosty stars. "Birchface is not the father of these kits, is he? Rabbitfur told me what happened today, how they showed no signs of being able to stalk or pounce like him. And don't tell me that they take after you instead," he added, cutting Mapleshade off as she opened her mouth. "You tread as lightly as any ThunderClan warrior." He looked past her, at the river splashing beyond the shade of the trees. "I watched your kits swim in that river as if they were fish. I think these kits were fathered by a RiverClan cat. Appledusk, I'd guess, judging by the color of their fur and by the way he spoke to you when he brought Patchkit back."

Mapleshade felt the ground sway beneath her paws. "ThunderClan is blessed to have three beautiful, strong kits," she hissed. "The truth will be revealed at the right time. It's not my fault that everyone assumed Birchface was their father."

"I cannot let you lie to our Clanmates!" Ravenwing spat. "And now that I know the truth, I cannot lie, either."

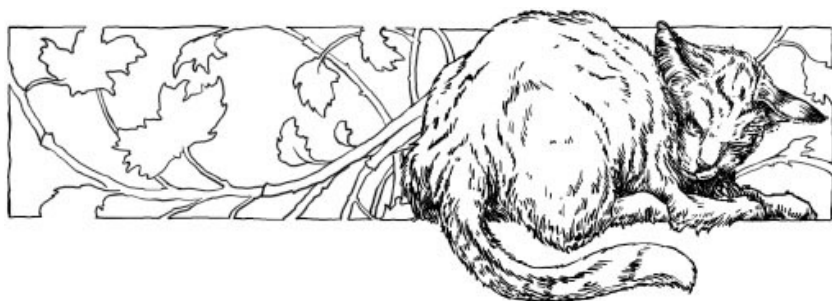
"I have told you nothing," Mapleshade mewed through clenched jaws.

"You have told me plenty," Ravenwing responded, and there was sadness in his sky-colored eyes. "The truth must come out."

"Please don't say anything!" Mapleshade begged. "These are ThunderClan's kits!"

"They are half RiverClan," Ravenwing corrected, his voice as hard as ice. "Our Clanmates deserve to know. I'm sorry, Mapleshade. Sorry for you, but even sorrier for these kits. They will end up suffering for the lies that you have told." He whirled around and vanished into the bracken.

Mapleshade stared after him. *StarClan, help me!* For a moment she considered taking her kits and running deeper into the forest, hiding her kits away from any cat who might harm them. But then she looked at Petalkit balancing the acorn on her head while her brothers tried to knock her off her paws and dislodge it. *ThunderClan loves these kits and won't do anything to hurt them. I always planned to tell them the truth. It's just happening sooner than I thought.*



## CHAPTER 4



*By the time they reached the path leading down to the ravine, the kits were dragging their paws with weariness. “Nearly there, little ones!” Mapleshade mewed encouragingly. She hoped she would be able to settle them in the nursery and give them a feed before Ravenwing came looking for her.*

Patchkit stumbled on the pebbly slope so Mapleshade let him lean against her shoulder and took almost all of his weight as they descended to the gorse tunnel. Petalkit let out a huge yawn. “I’m so sleepy!” she murmured.

“I’m hungry,” Larchkit squeaked. “My belly is rumbling louder than a badger!”

They pushed through the gorse tunnel, ducking their heads to keep the sharp twigs out of their eyes. Mapleshade followed, nudging Patchkit in front of her. When she emerged, Larchkit and Petalkit had stopped dead at the entrance. “Come on,” Mapleshade urged, her attention on Patchkit as he swayed on his feet.

“I think something’s happening,” Petalkit whispered.

Mapleshade looked up. The clearing was ringed with cats, all staring at them. Oakstar stood on Highrock, silhouetted against the trees. Ravenwing was crouched below him, his gaze fierce. The deputy Beetail was next to the medicine cat, his striped coat ruffled as if he had been interrupted mid-groom. Mapleshade started to tremble.

Patchkit pressed himself against her. “What’s wrong?” he whimpered.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” Mapleshade told him. “Go stand over there.” She pointed with her tail to a clump of bracken at the edge of the clearing. The three kits trotted over in silence and huddled together.

“Come here, Mapleshade,” Oakstar commanded.

On legs that seemed to be made of stone, Mapleshade walked forward until she was standing in the center of the clearing. “What is it, Oakstar?”

The dark brown tom twitched the tip of his tail. “Who is the father of your kits?” he asked. “Tell the truth!”

Before Mapleshade could speak, there was a flurry of ginger fur beside her. Frecklewish pushed past a cluster of warriors and joined Mapleshade below



Highrock. "We know it's Birchface!" she called up to Oakstar. "Why are you asking this?"

"I want Mapleshade to tell us herself," Oakstar mewed, his voice soft with menace. "She let me believe that my son Birchface was their father. I cannot imagine that one of my warriors would dare to tell such a lie."

Mapleshade shifted her weight onto her hind paws so she could hold the leader's gaze. "Any Clan would be proud to have these kits grow up to serve them," she declared.

"Even if they knew the kits were half-Clan?" Ravenwing meowed. "We deserve to know the truth, Mapleshade. Appledusk is their father, isn't he?"

For a moment, the whole forest seemed to hold its breath. Then there was a screech of pure horror and Frecklewish launched herself at Mapleshade. "Is this true?" she yowled, clawing at Mapleshade's face. "What have you done?"

Mapleshade stumbled backward. "Stop!" she gasped. She tried to raise her front paws to shield herself but Frecklewish had pinned her down.

Suddenly the weight was lifted from Mapleshade's belly and she opened her eyes to see the she-cat being hauled away by Bloomheart and Seedpelt. Mapleshade staggered to her paws. Blood pooled in her eye from a torn eyelid, and her cheek stung from a well-aimed blow. All around her, the cats hissed and muttered.

Frecklewish shook off the warriors and glared at Mapleshade. "You have betrayed my brother's name!" she spat. "You have betrayed us all with your lies and your disloyalty. You don't deserve to be called a warrior and nor do those . . . those half-Clan creatures." She curled her lip toward the three kits, who cowered beneath the ferns. "Their father killed Birchface and Flowerpaw! Get them out of here!"

Mapleshade shook scarlet droplets onto the grass. "Why does it matter who their father is?" she demanded furiously. "I have given ThunderClan three fine kits. I am a queen and I should be treated with respect. StarClan knows we need more warriors, and here they are!" *Have my Clanmates gone mad, that they would turn against me like this?*

Oakstar bounded down from Highrock and stood in front of her. His yellow eyes gleamed with hatred and he thrust his head forward until his breath blew hotly on Mapleshade's muzzle. "Have you forgotten that Appledusk murdered my son and Flowerpaw? Of all the cats, why did you have to choose *him*? You cannot possibly expect my forgiveness." He stepped back and raised his head. "You have betrayed the warrior code and lied to your Clanmates. We will not raise these kits within the walls of our camp, nor the boundaries of our territory. Take them and leave. You are no longer a warrior of ThunderClan."

Mapleshade stumbled backward. "You can't mean that! These kits belong to ThunderClan! You have to let us stay!"

Oakstar shook his head. "No, I do not." He gazed around at the Clan. "Ravenwing told me about an omen he received, a mysterious stream of water that washed three pieces of reed into his den. Reeds don't belong in our territory, and certainly not in the heart of our camp. These kits will bring nothing but danger!"

"Get rid of them!" screeched Frecklewish. "Drive them out!"

"Oakstar's right, they don't belong here," growled Bloomheart.

Mapleshade stared at the gray tabby in horror. "You were my mentor, Bloomheart! You know I would never betray my Clan!"

"You already have," he replied gruffly. "I am ashamed of you." He turned away, and Mapleshade felt her heart break into pieces.

"I will never forget this," she hissed, slowly turning to glare at each one of her Clanmates. "You have betrayed me and my kits. You will live to regret this day forever, ThunderClan, and that is a promise." She stalked over to her kits and swept her tail around them. "This is no longer our home," she told them. "Come."

She prodded them back through the gorse tunnel and up the path. Petalkit fell over and grazed her nose on a stone, but was too tired to protest. She simply picked herself up and stumbled on as if she knew there was no point in complaining. Mapleshade felt her heart break a little more.

"Why don't they like us anymore?" whimpered Patchkit as they headed into the trees. It had started to rain, and fat drops thudded onto the ferns around them.

"Because they're mouse-brained, bat-blind, and fox-hearted," Mapleshade hissed.

"Those are bad words!" Larchkit mewed. "You're not supposed to say them!"

"It's the truth," Mapleshade answered grimly.

"What were they saying about our father?" Petalkit asked. "Don't they like Birchface either?"

Mapleshade felt an overwhelming urge to lie down and slip into the darkness of sleep. "I'll tell you everything later," she promised. "First we must get across the river."

"We're going swimming again?" chirped Patchkit. "But that RiverClan cat said we had to stay away from the water."

"Everything is different now," Mapleshade murmured.

When they emerged from the shelter of the trees, the rain was pelting so hard that Mapleshade could hardly keep her eyes open.

"I don't want to go swimming anymore," Larchkit moaned. "I want to go home."

"I wish we were in the nursery," Petalkit sniffed. "It's too wet to be outside."

"We have no home!" Mapleshade snapped. She had to raise her voice over the pounding of raindrops on the shore. "Forget about ThunderClan and the nursery." She stared at the river. The tops of the stepping-stones were just visible among the wind-stirred waves. "We don't have to swim all the way," she told the kits. "Do you see those rocks? We just have to swim from one to the next until we get to the other side."

"But then we'll be in RiverClan!" Patchkit squeaked. "We're not supposed to go there!"

"It's all right," Mapleshade mewed, trying to sound calm. "Your father will be pleased to see us."

Larchkit tipped his head on one side. "I thought our father was dead!"

Mapleshade took a deep breath. "Remember that nice RiverClan cat who helped Patchkit today? He is your father. Not Birchface."

Larchkit wrinkled his nose. "But that doesn't make sense. Our father can't be from RiverClan. We're ThunderClan cats!"

"You're half RiverClan," Mapleshade told him. "That's why you liked the

water so much today.”

The three kits’ eyes stretched wider until they were like moons. “Is that why our Clanmates are mad at us?” asked Petalkit.

“Yes,” mewled Mapleshade. She felt the hackles rise along her spine. “But they are wrong,” she growled. “They’ll change their minds soon and until then, we’ll live in RiverClan. Everything will be okay.” She nudged Petalkit closer to the river. “Come on, we need to cross before it gets dark.”

The little brown kit hung back. “I don’t want to!” she wailed. “There’s too much water!”

“You’ll be fine,” Mapleshade insisted. She herded Larchkit and Patchkit alongside their sister. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Patchkit looked over his shoulder. “Promise we’ll be okay?”

“I promise.”

The ginger-and-white tom stepped bravely into the waves. Almost at once the water washed over his head but he fought his way up, spluttering. His littermates followed him. Mapleshade watched the three small heads bob to the first stepping-stone. They scrambled out and stood belly-deep in water, shivering.

“Wait for me!” Mapleshade called. “I’m coming!” Gritting her teeth, she waded into the river. The water sucked at her fur, chilling her to the bone. She forced herself to strike off from the shore and churn her paws, propelling herself toward the stepping-stones. *I have to do this for my kits*, she told herself, hating every moment.

Suddenly there was a roar from somewhere upstream. “Swim faster!” screeched Petalkit. “Something’s coming!”

Mapleshade glanced sideways to see a wall of water bearing down on her, sweeping branches and debris ahead of it. She paddled furiously but the current was dragging her away from the stones, not toward them. “Hold on!” she screeched to the kits as the wave crashed over her head.

Mapleshade was thrust to the bottom of the river by the force of the flood. Branches thudded against her and when she opened her eyes, she saw nothing but bubbles and churned-up pebbles. With her chest screaming for air, she clawed her way to the surface and burst out, gasping. Her flailing front paws struck something hard; unsheathing her claws, she managed to haul herself onto the rock. Somehow she had made it to the first stepping-stone. She looked around.

The kits had gone. Mapleshade stared into the water in horror. *My kits! Where are you?* Any hopes that they had struck out for the second stone vanished when she saw three tiny shapes being swept downstream.

“Help!” wailed Petalkit before a wave pushed her under.

Mapleshade launched herself off the stone and paddled furiously toward her kits. A pale shape bobbed in front of her. She reached out and managed to hook one claw into sodden fur. It was Patchkit. His eyes were closed.

“Wake up!” Mapleshade screeched. “You have to swim!”

A faint mew came from somewhere beside her. Mapleshade lifted her head and peered through the waves. Larchkit was clinging to a branch that hung into the river. Gripping Patchkit in her jaws, Mapleshade battled her way over to the tree. She tried to boost Patchkit out of the water but he was too heavy and he slipped out of her grasp.

“No!” Mapleshade yowled as he vanished into the black river.

Larchkit lost his grip on the branch and splashed into the water beside her. Mapleshade sank her teeth into his scruff but the pull of the current was too strong. Larchkit was ripped away from her and swept away with just one tiny cry.

"Mapleshade! Mapleshade! Grab hold of the branch!" There was a frantic shout from the shore. Mapleshade saw Appledusk wading into the river, his fur fluffed up in alarm. He gestured with his tail to the overhanging tree. "Hold on and I'll drag you out!"

Mapleshade was only dimly aware of hooking her claws into the branch beside her. She felt herself being dragged through the water, and then strong jaws were in her pelt, hauling her onto the stones. Appledusk loomed over her. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing? Where are the kits?"

Two more shapes appeared beside him. "What is a ThunderClan cat doing in the river?" asked one. Mapleshade recognized the voice of Splashfoot, a young tom.

"Is it Mapleshade?" asked his companion.

"I think so, Eeltail," mewed Splashfoot. He peered closer, his pale gray fur glowing in the failing light.

"My kits," Mapleshade rasped. "Save . . . my kits . . ."

Appledusk's face appeared above her, his eyes huge with horror. "Are you telling me the kits are in the river?"

Mapleshade nodded, too weak to speak.

Eeltail was already bounding along the shore. "If kits are in there, they are going to be in big trouble!" she called over her shoulder. Splashfoot raced after her.

Appledusk crouched beside Mapleshade. "I will find them, I promise," he whispered. Then he raced away from her.

Mapleshade closed her eyes. *StarClan, help my kits, she prayed. None of this is their fault. Take me if you must, but please, spare them.*

She lay still, feeling the water run off her fur, until she heard paw steps crunching over the stones. She lifted her head and saw Appledusk approaching. In the darkness, she couldn't see his expression. "Did you find them?"

"Yes," he meowed. "We found them."

Mapleshade hauled herself to her paws. "Where are they?"

Wordlessly, Appledusk turned and led her downstream. He pushed his way into a dense clump of reeds and beckoned Mapleshade forward with his tail. Eeltail and Splashfoot were standing over three small dark shapes. Eeltail looked up, her eyes brimming with pity. "I'm so sorry," she mewed. "We couldn't save them."

A ghastly shriek split the air. Mapleshade wondered where the noise was coming from until she realized that her mouth was wide open. She shut her jaws with a snap and took a step toward her kits. Her legs buckled and suddenly she was lying beside them, desperately licking each one in turn.

"Wake up, little ones," she urged. "We made it across the river. You are safe now!"

But the bodies rolled limply under the strokes of her tongue, and three pairs of eyes stayed closed.

Mapleshade pressed her muzzle against Patchkit's cold cheek. "You promised you would never leave me," she whispered. *You promised you would keep me safe.*

His voice echoed inside her head. "I'm sorry!" Mapleshade wailed. "I was trying to find us a new home. I didn't know where else to go."

"What are you talking about?" Appledusk sounded stunned. "Do you mean that you deliberately tried to cross the river? In the middle of a flood?"

Mapleshade twisted around to look at him. "ThunderClan threw us out," she explained. "We had nowhere else to go."

"I don't know what's going on here, but we need to take these kits to Darkstar," meowed Eeltail. "He needs to know about this."

For a moment Appledusk looked as if he was going to disagree, then he nodded. "You're right. Come on, we'll take one kit each. Mapleshade, follow us."

The RiverClan warriors gently picked up the drenched little shapes and carried them slowly back along the shore. Mapleshade stumbled behind them, too numb to think clearly. Beside them, the river had calmed and lapped at the shore like a cat's tongue, making soft, comforting noises in the still air. Mapleshade waited for Appledusk to send the other warriors on ahead, to find some excuse to be alone with her so they could mourn their kits together before facing the rest of his Clan. But he didn't turn back to look at her. *He hasn't even asked what I named them.*

The warriors threaded between tall reeds on a narrow path of dense brown soil. It opened into a clearing which was raised up from the water by heaps of more soil on top of tightly woven branches, like a huge nest. Mapleshade caught the glint of many pairs of eyes watching from among the reeds and her wet fur bristled.

An orange she-cat ran up to Appledusk. Mapleshade recognized her at once; it was Reedshine, the warrior who had been fussing over Appledusk at the Gathering.

"Did someone fall in the river?" Reedshine gasped. "Are you okay?"

The RiverClan warrior set down Petalkit's body as gently as if she were sleeping, and touched his tail to Reedshine's flank. "I'm fine. I need to speak with Darkstar."

Reedshine stayed where she was, her gaze flicking to Mapleshade and back again. "Why is she here? What's going on, Appledusk?"

There was a stir of movement at the far end of the clearing, and Darkstar stepped out of the reeds. All the cats fell silent.

Appledusk stepped forward. "Three kits have drowned in the river," he announced.

*Ask me their names!* Mapleshade screeched silently.

Appledusk looked at his paws. "I . . . I am their father."

Mapleshade held her breath. This was Appledusk's chance to plead for mercy on her behalf, to explain that Mapleshade deserved to be given a place in RiverClan because she had borne his kits.

Darkstar's eyes narrowed to tiny slits. "What do you mean, Appledusk? What are you talking about?"

"I'm so sorry, Reedshine," Appledusk whispered. "Please forgive me."

Reedshine twitched the tip of her tail. "Forgive you for what?"

Mapleshade looked at the concern in Reedshine's eyes and felt something inside her turn to ice. This was not just a Clanmate to Appledusk.

Appledusk bowed his head and went on. "Many moons ago, I met with Mapleshade in secret."

There was a gasp from his Clanmates, and one of them, a rumpled old tabby, hissed, "Traitor!"

Mapleshade kept her gaze fixed on Darkstar. *She has to take pity on me. I have lost my home and my kits. I have nothing left except Appledusk.*

"You knew about these kits?" Darkstar asked. The tip of her tail was twitching.

Appledusk nodded, and Reedshine let out a soft wail. "Mapleshade told me she would raise them in ThunderClan," Appledusk meowed. "I . . . I knew I had made a mistake so I said nothing to my Clanmates."

*A mistake?* Mapleshade almost winced at the pain in Appledusk's pale green eyes. Almost, but not quite. The ice was spreading through her faster than a leaf-bare frost. *Soon I won't be able to feel anything,* she thought.

"I should never have betrayed my Clan by meeting with Mapleshade," Appledusk went on. "I will regret it for the rest of my life, and I can only beg for your forgiveness."

"What brought these kits here tonight?" Darkstar queried, looking down at the three pitiful shapes.

Mapleshade opened her mouth to explain but Appledusk spoke first. "Mapleshade's Clanmates learned the truth and she had to leave. The river is flooded and the kits were too young to swim across." His voice faltered. Mapleshade stared at him. *You're making it sound as if this was my fault!*

Darkstar mewed, "The loss of any kits is a loss to all of us. But you broke the warrior code, Appledusk. How can I ever trust you again?"

Reedshine padded forward until she was standing alongside Appledusk with her fur brushing his. "There is no cat more loyal to RiverClan than Appledusk," she declared. "If I am willing to forgive him for his past mistakes, then so should you, Darkstar."

There were murmurs from the cats at the edge of the clearing. They sounded impressed by Reedshine's confidence.

Darkstar waited until the clearing was silent again, then nodded. "This is not the season for losing warriors. Appledusk, I believe that you are sorry for what you did, and that you have been punished enough by the death of your kits. I will allow you to remain in RiverClan—but know that I and the rest of the Clanmates will be watching you. You will have to earn back our trust."

Appledusk dipped his head so low that his muzzle almost touched the reeds beneath his paws. "I will never forget your mercy, Darkstar," he murmured. "Thank you. I promise my loyalty lies only with RiverClan, and my Clanmates." He glanced sideways at Reedshine, who blinked at him.

Darkstar gestured with her tail. "Rainfall, help Splashfoot and Eeltail to bury these kits. The accident of their birth is not their fault. They may lie in peace in our territory now."

Mapleshade struggled to find her voice. "What . . . what about me?" she croaked. "May I stay here with my kits?"

The RiverClan leader stared at her. "No, you may not. You will leave this territory at once and never set foot across the border again. Like Appledusk, I believe that the loss of your kits is punishment enough. Otherwise, rest assured my warriors would have clawed your fur off for what you have done."

"But night is falling!" Mapleshade protested. "Where will I go? Appledusk, help me!"

The pale brown warrior shook his head. "Why should I? It's your fault that these kits are dead. I never want to see you again."

Reedshine pressed herself even closer to Appledusk's flank. "Go away, Mapleshade," she hissed. "You have caused enough trouble tonight."

Mapleshade looked down at her drowned kits. "I cannot leave them," she whispered. "They are everything to me."

"And now they are dead," Appledusk growled. "Be thankful we have shown you some mercy, Mapleshade. Get out, before we make you leave."

Mapleshade stared at the cat whose face had occupied her mind for so many moons. She thought she had known every swirl of his fur, the angle of every whisker, but now she didn't recognize him at all. The coldness swelled inside her until she felt it burst out of her eyes, and there was a jolt of satisfaction as Appledusk flinched away from her gaze. "You told me you loved me!" Mapleshade hissed. "I went through the agony of bearing your kits! And now you treat me worse than prey. You will regret this, Appledusk. That is my last promise to you."

She turned and stumbled out of the clearing, blindly following paths through the reeds until she reached scent markers that suggested she was at the RiverClan boundary. She was dimly aware of crossing hard gray stone, then a massive shape loomed out of the shadows, a sharp-edged Twoleg den of some sort. She found a hole in the wall and slipped through into a musty, hay-scented space. Mapleshade slumped down on a clump of dusty dried stalks and shut her eyes. Sleep dragged her away, and her dreams were filled with the sight of her kits spiraling away from her in churning black water, screeching for help that never came.



## CHAPTER 5



*Mapleshade fought her way out of sleep, coughing and scorched with fever. Where am I?* She struggled out of her prickly nest and looked around. A fresh-killed mouse lay beside her, and Mapleshade's belly rumbled. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. She bent down to take a bite, then the memory of where she was and what had happened flooded over her and she retched violently. *My kits! Appledusk!*

"Hello? Are you all right?" An anxious mew made Mapleshade look up. A small black-and-white tom was standing at the foot of the huge stack of hay that filled the den. Daylight filtered through cracks in the wooden walls, highlighting tiny specks of dust that floated in the air.

"Where am I? Who are you?" Mapleshade rasped.

The little cat picked up a bundle of dripping moss that lay at his paws and carried it over to her. "You need to drink," he urged. "My name is Myler, and this is my barn. You went to sleep so quickly last night that I didn't have time to introduce myself. How are you feeling?" He peered at her and Mapleshade shied away. "You still look exhausted," Myler observed. "Eat the mouse, then I'll let you get some more rest.

"I'm not staying," Mapleshade hissed. "I don't want your fresh-kill."

"But there's plenty to share," Myler insisted. "I can catch more for myself, don't worry."

Mapleshade staggered forward, almost knocking the tom off his paws. "Leave me alone," she growled. "I don't need your help."

She searched for the gap in the wall where she had come in. Behind her, Myler was meowing something about giving shelter to strangers and having plenty of room in the barn. Mapleshade didn't bother to listen. What could some kittypet possibly give to her? *My life is ruined! I did nothing wrong, and yet I have lost everything!* The image of her three dead kits hovered at the edge of her vision, as if she would be able to see them clearly if only she could turn her head fast enough. *Mama, help me!* they wailed.



"I can't," Mapleshade whispered. "Oh my precious loves, I am so sorry."

Trembling with hunger, Mapleshade plunged into the wispy undergrowth that edged RiverClan's territory. She stayed well clear of the border as she headed uphill, toward the gorge. She knew there was a wooden Twoleg bridge just below the sheer walls of rock where she would be able to cross back to ThunderClan territory. She felt an irresistible pull inside her, back to the place where she had spent her whole life. There was no solace in the spindly willows of RiverClan, and the vast open moor that stretched up above the gorge made her shudder with fear. Instead she yearned for the denseness of sturdy trees and thick green undergrowth rooting her to the ground, filling her senses with familiar sounds and scents.

Mapleshade reached the wooden bridge and raced across, ears flattened and fur spiked. The noise of the river tumbling below dragged her mind back to the moment she had let go of Patchkit. *The water was too strong! It was not my fault that my kits died*, she reminded herself. She jumped off the bridge onto dry, sandy ground that sloped up toward Four Trees directly in front of her. If she turned and followed the river downstream, she would be in ThunderClan territory. Trying to ignore the sound of the water, she took a few steps toward the boundary, already tasting the scent markers on the still air.

Then she froze. She could not cross the border. She had been driven out—exiled by her own Clanmates. If she took one step into her former home, she would be treated worse than a rogue. An image swam into Mapleshade's mind of a small black cat, eyes narrowed with suspicion, spouting words that rang with righteous indignation. *Ravenwing!* This was all his fault. He had jumped to conclusions, shattered the Clan's trust in her, forced her Clanmates to judge her for something beyond her control. Because of his actions, Patchkit, Larchkit, and Petalkit had died. Every breath that Ravenwing took was a breath he had denied Mapleshade's kits.

Rage swelled inside Mapleshade's head until the sounds of the forest faded away and her vision blurred. She stumbled along the edge of the border, not caring when her claws scraped on stones or brambles dragged at her pelt. Her skin throbbed with heat and she was dimly aware of being thirstier than she had ever been in her life, but even when her paws splashed through a tiny stream, she couldn't muster the energy to stop and drink. Eventually she could walk no farther, and she flopped down where she was, in a narrow ditch beside a holly bush that smelled of home.

Mapleshade closed her eyes and listened to the thudding of her heart. It seemed to grow louder and louder, until the leaf mulch she was lying on started to quiver. With a jolt she opened her eyes and saw a ginger face staring down at her in dismay.

"Mapleshade!" squeaked Nettlepaw. "You're not supposed to be here!"

"Then pretend that I'm dead," Mapleshade growled. "I may as well be."

Nettlepaw's gaze darted around the ditch. "Where are the kits?" he whispered. "Are they in RiverClan?"

Mapleshade felt the numbness creeping over her once more. "They drowned in the river."

"Oh no!" Nettlepaw's eyes grew huge.

Mapleshade let her cheek rest on the cold dirt. "Leave me alone."

With a muffled meow, Nettlepaw turned and fled. Mapleshade wondered if she would ever climb out of the ditch. There was another patter of paw steps above her. Mapleshade opened one eye. Nettlepaw was pushing a bundle of herbs down toward her.

"I was collecting these for Ravenwing," he mewed. "But I think you need them more. You don't smell good, Mapleshade." He peered earnestly at her. "Please eat them. I . . . I'm sorry about your kits. Frecklewish saw what happened in the river, but I hoped you made it to the other side."

Mapleshade sat up with a hiss. "Frecklewish was *watching*?"

The apprentice looked scared. "Y-yes. She followed you to make sure that you left. She . . . she said you fell off the stepping-stones."

"And yet she did nothing?" Mapleshade rasped. "Those kits were helpless! How could she watch them drown?"

Nettlepaw started to back away. "I don't know. She must have thought they were okay. She said there were RiverClan cats on the far shore."

"They were not okay!" Mapleshade snarled, arching her back and sinking her claws into the mulch.

"Nettlepaw! Where are you?" a cat called from the other side of the holly bush. Nettlepaw let out a whimper and raced away.

Mapleshade sank back down into the ditch. She chewed the leaves without tasting them, feeling a stab of satisfaction that she had taken them from Ravenwing. How could he carry on gathering herbs, treating his Clanmates, as if nothing had happened? Mapleshade burned with the need to see him, to make him regret spilling the secret that was hers, and hers alone. She looked up at the moon, which had appeared in the twilight sky. In one sunrise it would be at its half, when the medicine cats traveled to the Moonstone. Mapleshade might be forbidden from entering ThunderClan's territory, but no cat could keep her away from the path that led to Mothermouth. Ravenwing would be alone on his journey, unprotected by warriors who were stupid enough to listen to his accusations and doom-mongering.

She felt the herbs working inside her, restoring strength to her legs. With a grunt, she jumped out of the ditch and started trotting away from the border, into the bramble thickets that encircled the hollow at Fourtrees. It wasn't safe to stay so close to ThunderClan, not when patrols might be looking out for her. She didn't know if Nettlepaw would keep quiet about finding her, though presumably he wouldn't admit to giving her the herbs.

Mapleshade dropped down the steep slope into the hollow, paused briefly to look up at the four gigantic oaks, then carried on, scrambling up the other side and plunging into the trees that bordered WindClan's territory. There was a strong smell of fox, which made her fur prickle, but it was stale rather than fresh, and would hide her own scent from curious border patrols.

She felt rather than heard the thrumming of terrified paws over the ground; peeping out of the bracken, she saw a rabbit hurtling across the moor toward her, pursued by a patrol of WindClan cats. Mapleshade hardly had time to think before the rabbit ran straight into her in a tumble of paws and fur. She bit down hard on its neck and it went limp. The warriors were still racing toward her so Mapleshade grasped the rabbit in her jaws and hauled it up the nearest tree. Her

claws tore on the smooth bark and the rabbit dragged at her teeth but at last she reached the lowest branch and crawled onto it with her fresh-kill. She heard the WindClan cats scramble to a halt below.

"Where did that rabbit go?" asked one of them.

Another was circling the trunk, sniffing the ground. "The trail ends here, but that's impossible. Rabbits don't climb trees."

"I don't know how you can smell anything," grumbled an old tom with patchy brown fur. Mapleshade thought his name was Midgepelt. "It stinks of fox around here."

Mapleshade held her breath, waiting for one of the cats to look up and see her. There was little leaf cover this far down the trunk, and she couldn't climb higher without making a noise. But the patrol sniffed around for a moment more, then headed back to the open moor, grumbling about vanishing prey. *Fools!* Mapleshade thought as she bit into the rabbit.

She spent the night under a clump of ferns a little deeper into the forest. She woke shivering beneath a light coat of frost, missing the warmth of her kits. *Wherever you are, I hope you are warm*, she thought through chattering teeth. Her belly was still full from the rabbit so she headed straight into the open, hoping it was too early for the WindClan dawn patrol. She had traveled to the Moonstone once before, as an apprentice. Mapleshade remembered her excitement at being inside WindClan's territory with impunity; how she had longed to be seen by a patrol and challenged! But now she darted from rock to clump of gorse, cursing the lack of cover on the empty moor.

At last she reached the foot of the slope and crouched beside the Thunderpath. The stench of monsters caught in her throat and made her eyes water, but there were few of the noisy beasts around this early. She only had to wait a few moments before silence fell heavily in the valley and she was able to dart across the hard black stone. On the other side, she plunged through the long soft grass and into a hedge. She recalled passing a Twoleg den with cows and a dark, hay-scented barn where she and the other apprentices had paused to hunt. She decided to stay well clear this time, in case she ran into any of the other medicine cats traveling early to the Moonstone.

After crossing a broad expanse of grass and pushing through another hedge, Mapleshade saw the dark brown tops of some Twoleg dens that looked like the barn. She swerved to the far side of the next stretch of grass and trotted through a row of trees to where the ground started to slope steeply up. Tilting back her head, she stared at the jagged rocks that marked the top of the ridge. The sun was striking them, turning them rosy and warm-looking, but their outlines still looked like teeth against the pale sky.

Mapleshade's belly rumbled and she realized that if she didn't eat now, she would be hungry for the rest of the day up on the hillside. She ducked back under the trees and quickly picked up the scent of a mole snuffling in the sunshine. Not her favorite fresh-kill but too easy to miss. She struck the flattened black body with her front paw and tucked in for a meal. Afterward she felt stronger, clearer-headed. She bounded up the side of the ridge, scattering loose pebbles under her paws. As the weak sun set the jagged stones ablaze, Mapleshade leaped onto a boulder and opened her jaws to screech at the valley below.

*I am ready for you, Ravenwing! You will pay for what you have done!*

The life that she had known was over; if she couldn't be a warrior, then she would dedicate every beat of her heart to avenging the deaths of her kits.



## CHAPTER 6



*The sun dragged slowly across the sky.* Mapleshade's belly was still full from the mole; besides, she was too tense to eat. Her claws were blunt after her long day of walking, so she sharpened them on a stone. A hawk swooped overhead and Mapleshade imagined it feasting on Ravenwing's body after she had finished with him. He would bleed a river of blood, every drop spilled for her helpless kits. . . .

At last the sky faded and the shadows between the rocks grew thicker. Mapleshade fluffed up her fur against the chill and crouched on top of a boulder, watching for any sign of movement at the foot of the hill. Suddenly a darker shadow flitted across the grass. Ravenwing was here! Alone and early, as he usually was. Mapleshade unsheathed her claws and let them scratch against the stone. She stayed very still, hardly breathing, as Ravenwing climbed the slope toward her. Mapleshade tensed her hindquarters, ready to leap down onto the medicine cat, but then she paused. If she attacked him out here, she might be seen by the other medicine cats. And where was the satisfaction in a simple ambush? She should follow Ravenwing down to the Moonstone and tackle him there, at the source of his precious omens.

Mapleshade pictured the long, stifling tunnel from her visit as an apprentice. Her pelt pricked at the thought of entering that darkness again, but then the wails of her kits echoed in her ears and she slid soundlessly off the boulder just a heartbeat before Ravenwing padded past. Mapleshade could hear him breathing heavily after the climb. She waited until he vanished into the gaping maw of Mothermouth before slipping out and trotting after him.

The hole swallowed her up at once, thick black shadows pressing around her until there was no glimpse of moonlight when she looked back at the entrance. Mapleshade padded over the stone floor, trying to keep her steps as light as possible. But Ravenwing must have heard something because he stopped, invisible in the dark ahead of her, and called out. "Who's there?"

Mapleshade froze, convinced that her heart was thudding loud enough for the medicine cat to hear. But after a moment Ravenwing carried on, his paw steps the

softest whisper in the silence. Faint gray light appeared ahead, silhouetting the medicine cat's ears. *The Moonstone!* Mapleshade realized she had dropped into the hunting crouch and was stalking forward once step at a time, her tail flattened behind her. She reached the opening to the cave and almost gasped out loud at the sight of the Moonstone glittering in the silver light. Ravenwing knelt in front of it, his head bowed.

With a hiss, Mapleshade sprang forward, claws extended. She landed on his back, sending him rolling onto the smooth cold stone. She caught a glimpse of his eyes, bright in the reflected moonlight.

"Mapleshade!" Ravenwing choked. "What are you doing here?"

Mapleshade let her claws sink into the fur around his throat. "Avenging the death of my kits," she snarled. "If I could kill you three times over, I would!" She knew she had nothing to say to the medicine cat. Nothing would bring back her kits. He simply did not deserve to live when they were dead. She bit down on Ravenwing's neck and the black cat went limp beneath her.

There was the sound of paw steps approaching down the tunnel. Mapleshade let Ravenwing fall to the floor and slipped behind the crystal.

"Great StarClan!" she heard Larkwing, the WindClan medicine cat, hiss. "Ravenwing! What happened?"

There was a grunt from his companion—peeking around the edge of the Moonstone, Mapleshade saw Sloefur, the ShadowClan medicine cat, sniff at Ravenwing's unmoving body. "He's dead," Sloefur announced in horror. He looked around and Mapleshade ducked behind the crystal.

"We can't leave him here," meowed Larkwing. "Come on, help me get him back to the surface."

Mapleshade listened to the sound of them dragging Ravenwing up the tunnel. She waited until the rays of the moon had slid past the hole in the roof and the cave was plunged into darkness. Mapleshade's heart pounded, but she reminded herself that she had nothing to be afraid of. The only dangerous thing in the shadows was her. She wondered if the medicine cats would continue with their gathering, but they did not come back to the cave. Mapleshade figured they had returned to their Clans to deliver the terrible news.

When the tiny patch of sky above the hole turned white with dawn, Mapleshade stretched her cold, stiff legs and padded back up the tunnel. Outside Mothermouth stood a heap of small stones that had not been there before. A tuft of black fur poked through a gap in the pile. Mapleshade sniffed and recognized Ravenwing's scent. Rather than carry him all the way back to the forest, his fellow medicine cats had decided to bury him here, marking his final nest with a careful mountain of rocks.

Mapleshade curled her lip. What memorial was there to her kits? Nothing but the cold wet dirt inside RiverClan's territory. She struck out at the pile of stones, knocking them to the ground. Her claws caught on the rocks and her pads stung but she kept flailing until the heap was destroyed and Ravenwing's body was exposed to the gray dawn. Mapleshade looked up and caught sight of a hawk circling overhead. *Here's your next piece of fresh-kill*, she thought with satisfaction.

The hawk swept down closer, and Mapleshade bounded away from the scattered stones. She bounded down the hillside without looking back. She had avenged her kits! *Were you watching, my precious kits? I killed him for you! I hope*

*you never see Ravenwing in StarClan. He should be in the Place of No Stars for all eternity.*

She reached a hedge at the edge of a stretch of thick soft grass and crawled under the branches. Suddenly she was too tired to walk another step. Ignoring the rumbling in her belly, she closed her eyes.

“Mama!”

“Help me!”

Two drenched faces appeared in front of Mapleshade, eyes huge and pleading, mouths open in tiny wails. The sound of the flooded river roared in Mapleshade’s ears.

“Patchkit! Petalkit!” she screeched. She thrashed with her front legs, trying to reach them as the water sucked them away, but her paws thudded against cold hard earth.

Mapleshade opened her eyes. She was lying under the hedge beneath Highstones. Why had she dreamed of her kits? Where was Larchkit?

“Mama! Save us!” Two voices echoed again.

Mapleshade shook herself and sat up. Ravenwing had died—did that mean only one kit had been avenged?

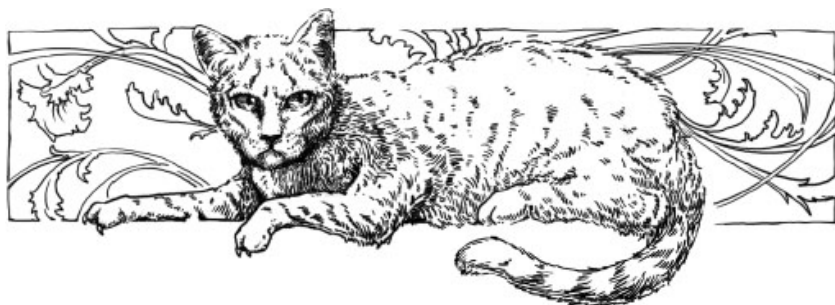
*StarClan, why are you doing this to me? I fell in love, that’s all! And now I am made to suffer more than any cat has before.*

An image drifted into her mind of a pale brown cat sitting among ferns, looking out at a churning black river as it swept three little shapes away. *Frecklewish!* According to Nettlepaw, she had seen the kits struggling, but had done nothing to save them. They may not have been Frecklewish’s kin, but the warrior code said that no kit should be left in danger, regardless of Clan.

Frecklewish needed to pay for the lost kits, just as Ravenwing had done.

Mapleshade stood up, shaking on exhausted paws. This would be harder to achieve because Frecklewish only left ThunderClan to go to Gatherings, when she would be surrounded by her Clanmates. And even inside the border she was rarely alone. Mapleshade needed to find a way to attack her within the territory, the safest place for a warrior to be. Thinking hard, she started to pad along the bottom of the hedge. A tendril of ivy caught at her foot and almost tripped her. Hissing, Mapleshade snatched her paw away. The ivy lay on the ground, quivering like a glossy green snake.

*Snakerocks!* Mapleshade pictured the nest of adders that had been blocked in with stones. Perhaps there was something deadly inside ThunderClan’s borders after all!



## CHAPTER 7



*Mapleshade trekked back to the forest*, skirting the edge of WindClan under cover of darkness and heading for ThunderClan's border with Twolegplace. She knew she would have to wait for Frecklewish to pass by on patrol; even then, Mapleshade would need the luck of StarClan to get the she-cat alone. She plunged into the lush green grass at the foot of the Twoleg fences, then scrambled up and over the wooden barrier, dropping down into the small, strongly scented enclosure on the other side.

Almost at once, a fat gray-and-white tom heaved himself through a tiny flap in the side of the Twoleg den and lumbered toward her, mewling.

"Get out of here! You're one of those stinking forest cats, aren't you? My housefolk don't want you in their backyard! Shoo!"

Mapleshade waited until the kittypet was a mouse-length away, then shot out one paw and raked his face. The kittypet leaped backward, screeching. Blood dripped from his blunt muzzle. "Ow!" he wailed.

Mapleshade stayed where she was. The kittypet glared at her through screwed-up eyes before turning and shuffling back to the den. When the flap banged shut behind his plump haunches, Mapleshade studied the enclosure. A tree grew beside the fence with broad enough branches to support her, and dense leaves to hide her from view. She would wait there for Frecklewish. She scrambled up the tree and settled on a bough that looked out over the forest. She had caught a squirrel at Fourtrees and drunk from a stream so her belly was comfortably full. Resting her chin on her paws, she let herself doze, one ear pricked for any sounds from below.

At dusk four ThunderClan warriors came past, creeping along the bottom of the fence as if they feared the kittypets were about to attack. Mapleshade curled her lip in scorn. She had thought her Clanmates were braver than that. Frecklewish was not among them, though. As night fell, Mapleshade dropped down from her branch into the long grass, hoping to hunt. ThunderClan scent surrounded her and for a moment she felt a pang of longing; then she pictured her



Clanmates driving her and her kits away, and she thought of Frecklewish watching her kits drown, and her fury returned. She quickly caught a blackbird that was wrestling with a worm and carried it back to the tree. Behind her, the gray-and-white tom was bundled out of the den by a cross-sounding Twoleg. Mapleshade watched the kittypet squat on the grass, its eyes huge with fear, then race back inside. *Ha! He knows this territory is mine now!*

Mapleshade slept fitfully, the bark digging into her belly fur and sending a damp chill through her bones. She woke with the first glimmer of dawn, feeling pangs of hunger. The blackbird had been old and scrawny. Mapleshade scanned the forest for signs of movement. All was still beneath the trees. She jumped down and padded into the ferns, scanning for prey. A tiny rustle alerted her to a mouse scurrying at the foot of a sycamore tree. Mapleshade stalked forward, hoping her flashes of white fur wouldn't startle her prey. The mouse was intent on nibbling a seed so Mapleshade was able to pounce unseen, killing the creature with a single blow to its neck.

Then she froze. She heard voices! Bloomheart was among them, directing his patrol to split up and hunt before meeting again at the lightning-struck elm. There wasn't time to get back to the Twoleg fence, so Mapleshade crouched beneath a clump of bracken with her fresh-kill. Paw steps came closer, then a glimpse of pale brown fur through the green stems. *Frecklewish!* StarClan had brought her right to Mapleshade. But she couldn't attack her here, not when the others were so close by.

Mapleshade backed carefully out of the bracken, dragging the mouse. Its body was still warm so the scent it left would seem fresh. Sure enough, she heard Frecklewish sniffing the air and uttering a low growl that suggested she had picked up the trail. Mapleshade let the mouse scrape along the ground a little more before daring to pick it up and move forward with it dangling from her jaws. She couldn't risk being seen by Frecklewish before she had reached Snakerocks.

Mapleshade deliberately pushed her way through the thickest undergrowth so that the mouse left a generous trail of scent. She hoped that her own scent would be lost among general ThunderClan odors; she didn't think she had been out of the Clan long enough to smell unfamiliar. She could only just hear Frecklewish stalking her; the she-cat was one of the best hunters in the Clan and moved as lightly as a butterfly's wing over the leaf-strewn ground.

Suddenly dark gray stones loomed over the stems of bracken. Mapleshade swerved, still carrying the mouse, which felt heavier and heavier in her jaws. She padded around the base of the rocks and emerged into the clearing on the other side. There was hardly any trace of cat scent; clearly the warriors were concerned that the adders might escape from their prison. Mapleshade hoped the snakes were still there, but had no time to check. She left the mouse on the ground and raced to the heap of smaller stones that had been piled in front of the adders' nest. She pushed aside as many as she could, leaving a gaping black hole, then ducked behind a boulder.

Frecklewish emerged cautiously from the bushes, her jaws parted to scent the air and her fur bristling. She looked puzzled when she saw the dead mouse. Mapleshade sprang out from behind the rock and snarled at her.

"You let my kits die!"

Frecklewish stumbled backward in shock. "Mapleshade! You shouldn't be here!" She arched her back. "Leave or I'll call the rest of the patrol."

Mapleshade lashed her tail. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a tiny flicker of movement from the pile of stones. Was that a snake slithering into the light? Mapleshade took a step closer to the rocks. "Too scared to fight me yourself, Frecklewish?" she hissed. "You prefer watching helpless kits drown, don't you?"

The brown she-cat stiffened. "I thought your kits would be saved," she rasped. "I never meant for them to die."

Mapleshade sniffed. "I don't believe you! You're a fox-hearted coward. I bet you're glad they are dead!"

Frecklewish bounded toward Mapleshade, her eyes flashing with anger. "I wish you were dead!" she spat. "You betrayed my brother's name!"

Mapleshade dodged sideways just as Frecklewish lunged at her. With a yelp, the she-cat stumbled into the pile of stones. Before she could find her footing, there was a hiss and a sleek dark green head darted forward, tongue flicking.

"Adder!" gasped Frecklewish. There was a blur of movement, then Frecklewish staggered backward, screeching. "It bit me! Help!"

"Like you helped my kits?" Mapleshade growled. "Never! I hope you die in agony!"

Frecklewish yowled again, a wordless shriek of pain. Almost at once paw steps thrummed toward them through the trees.

"Frecklewish, is that you?" called Bloomheart.

Mapleshade slipped into a clump of bracken at the far side of the clearing. She knew she should flee before the patrol arrived but she wanted to watch Frecklewish die. With a crackling of undergrowth, Bloomheart and two other ThunderClan warriors, Seedpelt and Thrushtalon, burst into the clearing.

"Keep watch for snakes!" Bloomheart ordered. His Clanmates spun around and scanned the rocks. Bloomheart bent over Frecklewish, who was curled on the ground with her paws over her eyes. "It's all right, Frecklewish, we're here now."

"My eyes!" wailed Frecklewish. "I can't see!"

Bloomheart lifted his head. "Oh StarClan, if ever we needed Ravenwing, it is now! Why did you take him from us?" Then he shook himself and faced his Clanmates. "Seedwhisker, we need soaked moss, as fast as you can. We have to wash the venom out of her eyes. Thrushtalon, fetch every scrap of fennel you can find in the medicine stores. We have to try to save Frecklewish's eyesight."

The two warriors darted away. Bloomheart placed his paw on Frecklewish's flank. "Lie still," he meowed. "We're doing everything we can."

"But ThunderClan doesn't have a medicine cat!" Frecklewish whimpered. "Am I going to die?"

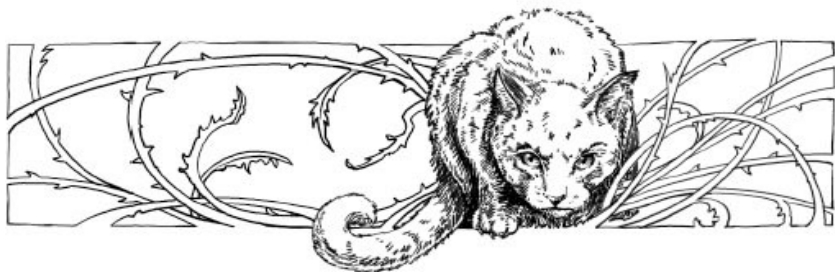
"Not on my watch," Bloomheart vowed.

Mapleshade felt bile rise in her throat as her former mentor soothed the cat who had watched her kits drown. Frecklewish's eyes were a seeping, clouded mess. Even if she survived, she would never watch anything again. Mapleshade knew she had to leave before the rest of ThunderClan rushed to help Frecklewish. She crept through the undergrowth to the thickest part of the forest, then raced back to the Twoleg fence. Cries of alarm filtered through the trees as more warriors arrived at Snakerocks. The sounds faded as Mapleshade scrambled over the fence and crouched on the bare brown earth, panting.

Only one voice echoed in her ears now: Patchkit, her tiniest, most defenseless kit. "Help me, Mama!"

Her daughter, Petalkit, had found peace with the attack on Frecklewish. Like Larchkit, her desperate cries had been silenced. For a moment Mapleshade's breath was crushed beneath a wave of grief for the son and daughter she might never see again. Then she clenched her jaw and pictured the final cat who had to suffer for the death of her kits.

"Not long now, Patchkit," she vowed. "Soon you will be free!"



## CHAPTER 8



As dusk fell, bringing with it a cold, damp wind, Mapleshade jumped down from the fence into the forest and followed the boundary along the edge of Twolegplace. Raindrops pattered around her as she reached the pine trees, whose spindly trunks and whispering needles gave little shelter. Mapleshade padded softly over the forest floor, staying well outside the ThunderClan border as she skirted the Treecutplace—silent and dark now—and plunged back into dense undergrowth. Brambles scraped her pelt and blocked her way, but Mapleshade kept pushing through, ears pricked for the first sounds of the river.

By now the rain was falling more heavily, rattling the leaves and stalks around Mapleshade's ears. She gasped when she suddenly emerged from a clump of stiff grasses to find herself at the top of a steep bank with the river sliding past, thick and black and deadly, just a tail-length below. She scrambled backward with a hiss. For a moment she thought she saw three small shapes twisting and tumbling in the water, but it was only a reflection of starlight.

Mapleshade stared at the reeds growing on the far shore. Somewhere in there was the RiverClan camp, perched like a bird's nest above the sodden ground. If she strained her ears past the sound of the rain, she could almost hear the murmurings of cats as they settled down for the night. Mapleshade pictured Appledusk lying in his den with Reedshine curled beside him, her orange pelt merging with his soft brown fur. The hair rose on Mapleshade's neck and she bared her teeth. *Appledusk will regret the day he met me! All those times he said he loved me, all the promises he made—they were nothing but lies! He never wanted my kits, so he let them drown. He could have saved them, I know he could have!*

Behind her, the sky was lightening above the trees. Dawn was a while off, but Mapleshade felt more comfortable traveling in darkness, so instead of giving in to the urge to sleep, she picked her way downstream along the bank. There was a ridge of little stones stretching across the river down here—she had used them to cross to meet Appledusk on the other side once. There was no way Mapleshade was going to swim across the river, but she could wade if she had to.

She reached the stones, invisible in the dark but recognizable by the way the

noise of the river changed as it flowed over them. Shuddering, Mapleshade jumped down the bank and waded in. Her belly fur was instantly soaked and she gasped at the cold. She forced her legs through the current, feeling the water tug against her and splash her flanks. The river was much slower and shallower than when she had tried to cross with her kits, but she still hated every paw step, and she hissed with relief when she hauled herself onto the far bank. She lay there for a while, panting, as the water trickled from her fur. It had stopped raining but the sky was thick with clouds and the wind was growing stronger, scented with more rain to come.

Mapleshade forced herself to stand and keep going. Plunging into the reeds, stiff and springy so that they flicked her face and tripped her tired paws, she pushed forward until she detected RiverClan border marks, then retraced her steps so that she was following the edge of the territory safely out of scent-range. Dense reeds gave way to softer undergrowth dotted with low, slender-branched willow trees. Her belly rumbled but she didn't dare hunt in case it alerted the RiverClan cats. Sounds carried too easily on this side of the river.

Gradually the ground became firmer and drier beneath her paws, and the air filled with green, leafy scents rather than the taint of fish. Mapleshade reached a dense stand of trees, leafier and sturdier than the other willows. The territory border was just close enough that she could look down from the branches and watch for passing cats. With a sigh as she recalled just how much time she had spent up a tree recently, Mapleshade clawed her way up the nearest trunk and eased her way onto one of the lower boughs. Without knowing the habits of RiverClan warriors, she hadn't been able to think of a plan to trap Appledusk alone. She would just have to learn what she could from watching.

Mapleshade fluffed up her fur against the cold and waited. She was rewarded quite soon by a cluster of paw steps crackling nearer: an early hunting patrol, chattering and crashing through the undergrowth as if they wanted to alert all the prey to their approach. Mapleshade curled her lip, thinking of ThunderClan's stealth. The patrol passed right under her branch without noticing her.

Before their noise had faded, more cats approached. The breeze carried a scent that made Mapleshade's nostrils flare. A heartbeat later, the bracken parted to reveal a pale brown cat, broad-shouldered beneath his thick, glossy fur. *Appledusk!* Once again, StarClan had brought Mapleshade's prey right to her paws.

But then the stalks rustled and a plump gray apprentice bundled out. He crouched down and leaped forward, stubby front legs outstretched. Appledusk shook his head. "You need more height than that, Perchpaw," he chided. "You must be prepared to fight full-grown warriors when you go into battle."

The young cat's blue eyes stretched wide. "I will get taller, won't I?"

Appledusk purred. "Of course you will, but you still need to learn how to jump."

"Why don't I spring at you to show him how it's done?" asked a voice. An orange she-cat slipped into the clearing. Mapleshade's hackles bristled. *Can't Reedshine let Appledusk do anything on his own?*

Appledusk went to meet his Clanmate and rubbed his cheek against hers. "I'm not letting you do anything," he mewed. "Think of our kits!"

Reedshine glanced at her belly, barely swollen beneath her pelt. "I'm not

sick!" she protested.

"I know you're not," meowed Appledusk. "But our kits are too precious to risk Perchpaw injuring you by mistake!"

Mapleshade gripped the branch so tightly that two of her claws snapped off. She barely noticed the jolt of pain. How could Reedshine be expecting kits already? How many lies had Appledusk told? She bunched her quarters beneath her, ready to leap down the moment Reedshine and Perchpaw left Appledusk alone, but the three cats moved off together with Perchpaw earnestly discussing battle tactics.

Mapleshade crouched in the tree and seethed with rage. A cold wet figure pressed against her flank, screeching for help. Mapleshade tried to curl her tail around her last remaining kit, but there was nothing but empty air beside her. She was dimly aware of being hungry and thirsty, and exhausted after her trek through the night, but nothing mattered now except taking revenge on the cat who had destroyed her world. She would wait here for as long as she had to—for the rest of her life, if it meant she could finally silence Patchkit's wails.

She must have dozed, because she woke with a start much later when the air was filled with misty rain and the ferns were filling up with shadows. Something was approaching through the undergrowth. Mapleshade stiffened, wondering if StarClan would bring Appledusk to her twice in one day. Then a bundle of fur blundered into the clearing and skidded to a halt at the foot of the tree.

"Take that, ThunderClan mouse-dung!" Perchpaw squealed, slapping his paw down onto a twig. As the twig snapped, he spun around, ears flattened. "Creep up on me, would you? You're as fox-hearted as your Clanmate!" He lurched forward and crushed a large clump of moss. Then he straightened up and looked down at his enemy. "Oops. I could have taken that back to the elders' den. I'll look for some more."

He trotted toward Mapleshade's tree, peering at the roots. Mapleshade let go of the branch and plummeted straight down onto the apprentice's back, knocking him to the ground with an *oof*. Before Perchpaw could figure out what was happening, Mapleshade grabbed his scruff in her teeth and hauled him past the tree, across the border. Her eyes bulged with the effort; the fat apprentice weighed more than a badger!

Perchpaw yowled and thrashed but Mapleshade sank her teeth farther into his pelt until he stopped struggling. "Who are you? What do you want?" he growled.

Mapleshade placed one paw heavily on his shoulders and snarled, "Keep still or I'll rip your throat out."

Perchpaw blinked. "I'm a RiverClan warrior! Let me go!"

"No you're not," Mapleshade hissed. "You're a stupid apprentice. It's all right, I'm not interested in killing you. I only want you as bait."

When Perchpaw tried to speak, she forced his face into the ground, muffling his protests. Then she squatted down, resting most of her bulk on his haunches, and waited.

"Perchpaw! Perchpaw, where are you?"

Mapleshade almost purred. A moment later, Appledusk trotted into the clearing, his eyes troubled. "Why can't you do what you're told for once?" he complained, looking around. "If I find out you've been practicing battle moves

instead of collecting moss, you're going to be in big trouble, Perchpaw!"

Mapleshade gripped Perchpaw's neck fur in her teeth and dragged him out from behind the tree. She let the apprentice fall to the ground. "Is this what you're looking for, Appledusk?"

The warrior stared at her in horror. "You were told to leave our territory!"

Mapleshade twitched the tip of her tail. "And you thought I would? You're more mouse-brained than I thought. You killed our kits, and now you must pay."

Appledusk bared his teeth. "What are you talking about? *You* killed our kits, making them cross the river. Let Perchpaw go and get out of here before I call for a patrol."

Mapleshade jumped over Perchpaw and stood in front of the brown warrior, pelt bristling, paws planted firmly. "You can have that useless lump of fur back," she snarled. "But you'll have to fight me first."



## CHAPTER 9



*Appledusk took a step back. His eyes clouded and he suddenly looked weary. "Mapleshade, I don't want to fight you," he meowed.*

*"I'm not giving you a choice!" Mapleshade hissed. She bunched her hindquarters beneath her and lunged at him.*

*Appledusk dodged away. "Just leave!" he gasped.*

*There was a crackle of stalks behind him and Reedshine appeared. "What's going on?" Her gaze fell on Mapleshade. "What's she doing here?"*

*Half-blind with fury, Mapleshade hurled herself at the orange she-cat. "You and your kits must die!" she screeched. "Appledusk is mine!" She unsheathed her claws, aiming for Reedshine's face.*

*There was a thud of paws, then silence, and a solid brown shape flashed in front of Mapleshade. Her claws struck home, piercing fur and flesh, and a spurt of blood leaped out at her. With a grunt, Appledusk dropped at her feet, blood pouring from his throat.*

*In the same moment, a heavy weight struck Mapleshade from behind. Perchpaw gripped her with his paws and bit down hard on her neck. Mapleshade staggered forward and almost fell. Perchpaw slid off her back. Mapleshade could feel him trembling against her flank; then she realized that she was the one shaking. *Why? I'm not frightened.**

*"He's dead!" Reedshine shrieked, crouching beside Appledusk. She stared up at Mapleshade, her horrified eyes ringed with white. "You killed him!"*

*Mapleshade tried to take a step forward but her legs felt strangely heavy and her vision was blurred. *Is it raining?* she wondered. Something hot and wet spilled down her front legs, and there was a dull ache behind her ears. She shook her head and bright red droplets spattered the ground like tiny fallen leaves.*

*Something small and ginger and white stirred beside Appledusk's unmoving body. "You killed him, Mama!" shrilled Patchkit. His little tail was held high with triumph. "We are all free now!" He started to fade against his father's light brown fur.*



Mapleshade stumbled toward her son. "Wait!" she gasped. "Don't leave me!"

Reedshine rose up from behind Appledusk and hissed at Mapleshade. "Don't come any closer! What you have done here is more terrible than anything a Clan cat has done before. But you have not won, Mapleshade. Appledusk will live on in his kits, and in their kits, and their kits in turn. His spirit will not die. He will be part of RiverClan *forever!*"

Mapleshade swayed, feeling the soil sticky beneath her paws. "Then I will watch over all your kin and punish each one for what you did to me," she rasped. "My vengeance is not finished yet. It will never be finished!"

She lurched toward the bushes behind the willow tree. She dimly heard Perchpaw start to follow her, but Reedshine called him back. "She has done enough harm," Mapleshade heard her mew. "Let her crawl away to die alone."

Mapleshade forced her way through the undergrowth. She felt no pain, just a strange numbness that seemed to be spreading through her body. She reached the edge of the bushes, and the walls of the Twoleg den where she had slept on the first night of her exile loomed up in front of her, but Mapleshade was too weak to go any farther. She slumped to the ground, feeling dirt and tiny stones grind into her blood-soaked fur. She closed her eyes, waiting for the faces of her kits to appear and thank her for everything she had done.

But there was nothing behind her eyes except swirling darkness, battered by an icy wind and unbroken by even a glimmer of stars. Mapleshade felt the first stirrings of fear. "StarClan, where are you?" she wailed into the endless night. "Where are my kits?"

A small furry face appeared blurrily in front of her eyes. "Patchkit?" Mapleshade gasped. She tried to reach out with one paw.

"It's you!" exclaimed the cat. "Do you remember me? I'm Myler. We met once before." Mapleshade felt his nose press along her flank. "You're badly hurt," mewed the little cat. "You poor thing. Come on, let's get you inside."

With surprising strength, he boosted Mapleshade to her feet with his shoulder and guided her into the Twoleg den. Mapleshade collapsed onto a pile of hay. *I have lost everything*, she thought. *What do I have left to live for?*

There was a bustle of movement beside her and the black-and-white cat started dabbing at her fur with a piece of wet moss. Mapleshade was too weary to push him away. She half opened one eye and saw blood flowing freely down her shoulder, pooling beneath her.

"There's too much, too much," fretted Myler. He dabbed more frantically. "Did a Clan cat do this to you?"

Mapleshade closed her eye again and nodded.

The little cat sighed. "Ah, there is no end to their wildness and thirst for blood," he muttered. "You should have left while you had the chance."

*Leave? How could I ever leave? I swore to avenge the deaths of my kits, and that's what I have done. And yet that vengeance is not over, because Appledusk will live on in Reedshine's kits. I will never be finished.*

Myler curled up beside her, hardly flinching as his fur pressed against her bloody body. "I'll stay with you," he promised. "You're safe now."

Mapleshade unsheathed her scarlet, broken claws. "Leave me alone," she rasped, forcing herself to lift her head and glare at her companion. "I don't need anyone."

The black-and-white cat stood up and looked down at her with sadness in his eyes. "I think you are wrong," he whispered. But he turned and padded into the hay-scented darkness.

For a moment Mapleshade longed to call him back, but sleep was dragging at her, heavier than stones, stronger than the river. She closed her eyes and watched her mind fill with churning shadows, pierced by shrieks of terror that made her jump. She realized that she could feel ground beneath her paws, cold and sodden and stinking like the river. Somehow she could walk again, strength flowing back into her limbs and her vision clearing.

She emerged into a half-lit clearing surrounded by gray tree trunks. Although she felt no fear, she was aware of being watched by unseen eyes. "Am I dead?" she meowed out loud, listening to her voice echo between the trees. "Is this StarClan?"

She looked up, but there were no stars in the thick black sky above her, not even a glimmer of silver beyond the rustling leaves. Instead, what light there was seemed to come from fleshy fungus growing on the roots of the trees, and from the slimy trunks themselves.

"Not StarClan," whispered a voice from somewhere behind her. "This is the Dark Forest, the Place of No Stars. We welcome you, Mapleshade."

Mapleshade spun around. "Who are you? Show yourself!"

"Never," hissed the voice. "You have come here to walk alone in your blood-soaked memories."

Instead of dread, Mapleshade felt a surge of triumph. If she was here because of what she had endured, then there would be other cats like her, cats who would understand what she had gone through, who knew what it was to stand up to their enemies and dole out immeasurable pain.

She would find these cats, whatever that voice had told her, train them to be as strong and fearless as she was, and use them to cause more trouble for the Clans than the warriors could imagine in their worst dreams.

Mapleshade had found a place where she truly belonged. From here, she could cause more suffering than when she had been alive, and fighting her battles alone. For all eternity, Appledusk's kin would mourn the day he had destroyed the life of a ThunderClan warrior. Just as she had promised to Reedshine, Mapleshade's desire for vengeance would never sleep.

EXCERPT FROM *WARRIORS SUPER EDITION*:  
*CROOKEDSTAR'S PROMISE*

MAPLESHADE RETURNS IN

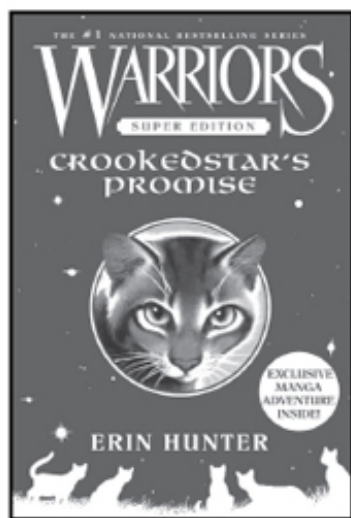
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SUPER EDITION

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# WARRIORS

CROOKEDSTAR'S  
PROMISE



Keep reading for an excerpt!



## CHAPTER 1



*Stormkit edged farther along the slippery branch. Volekit's dare rang in his ears. Bet you fall off before you get to the end!*

He unsheathed his claws and dug them into the frozen bark. From here, he could see a long way downstream, as far as the bend in the river. He could just glimpse the first of the stepping-stones beyond. And on the far shore, Sunningrocks! Its sheer side shadowed the water and its wide, smooth stone summit sparkled with frost. Stormkit fluffed out his fur. He'd seen farther than any other kit in the Clan! They'd never even seen past the reed bed.

"Be careful!" Oakkit called from the camp clearing.

"Shut up, Oakkit! I'm a warrior!" Stormkit looked down, past the fat, mouse-brown bulrush heads, into the dense forest of reeds that jutted out of the icy river. Minnows flitted between the stems, their scales flashing.

Could he reach down with a paw, break the thin ice, and scoop them out? He pressed his pale brown belly to the bark, wrapped his hind legs around the narrow branch, and swung his forepaws down toward the tiny fish. Tingling with frustration, he felt his claws brush the tips of the bulrushes. *I was born in a storm! I'm going to be Clan leader one day!* Stormkit stretched harder, trembling with the effort.

"What are you doing?" Oakkit yelped.

"Let him be!" Stormkit heard Rainflower silencing Oakkit, a purr rumbling in her throat. "Your brother has the courage of a warrior already."

Stormkit clung tighter to the branch. *I'll be fine. I'm stronger than StarClan.*

"Look out!" Oakkit squeaked.

A rush of wind tugged Stormkit's fur. A flurry of black-and-white feathers battered his ears.

*Maggie!*

Talons scraped his spine.

*Frog dirt and fish guts!* Stormkit's claws were wrenched out of the bark. He plummeted into the reeds and crashed through the thin ice. The freezing water shocked the breath from him. Minnows darted away as he thrashed in the water.

*Where's the shore?* River water flooded his mouth. It tasted of stone and weeds. Spluttering, he struggled to swim, but the stiff reeds blocked his flailing paws. *StarClan, help me!* Panic shot through him as he fought to keep his muzzle above water.

Suddenly the stems beside him swished apart and Tanglewhisker plunged through.

"I'm okay!" Stormkit spluttered. Water rushed into his mouth again and he sank, coughing, beneath the ice.

Teeth gripped his scruff.

"Kits!"

Stormkit heard Tanglewhisker's muffled growl as the elder hauled him up.

Shivering with cold, Stormkit bunched his paws against his belly, wincing with embarrassment as Tanglewhisker pushed his way through the reeds and deposited Stormkit on the bank next to his mother.

"Nice dive, Stormkit!" Volekit teased.

"Like a kingfisher," Beetlekit added. "Maybe Hailstar should change your name to Birdbrain."

Stormkit growled at the two kits as they crowded around him. One moon older, they loomed over him like crows.

Echomist paced anxiously behind them, her soft gray fur fluffed with worry. "Don't tease, you two."

Petalkit pushed past her brothers. "I wasn't teasing!" The pretty tortoiseshell she-cat stuck her nose in the air. "I think he was brave to try!"

Purring, Rainflower licked Stormkit's ears. "Next time, grip the branch harder."

Stormkit shook her off. "Don't worry. I will."

As Tanglewhisker shook water from his long tabby pelt, Birdsong hurried down the slope from the elders' den. "You'll catch cold!" she scolded.

Tanglewhisker blinked at his tabby-and-white mate. "Did you want me to let him drown?"

"One of the warriors would have rescued him," Birdsong retorted.

Tanglewhisker shrugged. "They're busy."

Rainflower purred. "I think Stormkit would have found his own way out. He's a strong little cat, aren't you?"

Stormkit felt his fur glow with the warmth of his mother's praise. He blinked water out of his eyes and looked around the clearing. This was the home of RiverClan, the greatest Clan of all. He hadn't seen it before the flood, so the smooth brown mud that covered the ground and the heaps of battered wet reeds that cluttered every corner were more familiar to him than the densely woven walls and open spaces that were emerging. Timberfur and Cedarpelt were carrying bundles of freshly picked dry reeds across the clearing to Softpaw and Whitepaw, who were weaving them into the tattered apprentices' den. Farther along the river's edge, Shellheart and Ottersplash were gathering more stems. Fallowtail was helping Brambleberry clear the last of the muddy debris from the medicine den. Owlfur and Lakeshine were dragging deadwood and bark that had

been washed through the reeds and into the clearing.

A whole moon had passed since the stormy night when Stormkit and Oakkit had been born, but the camp still showed signs of being swept away. Fortunately the elders' den had held firm and only needed a little reweaving here and there. And the nursery, a ball of tightly overlapping willow branches and reeds, had been found downstream, wedged between the stepping-stones. It had been easy enough to drag it back to camp and lodge it among the thick sedge bushes. A few patches had repaired it, though it was still damp inside from the soaking. Rainflower tucked fresh moss into their nest every evening, but Stormkit still woke each morning with a cold, wet pelt.

The rest of the camp was harder to fix. It had taken half a moon's digging and levering to roll the fallen tree to the edge of the clearing where the old warriors' dens had stood. Once the broken branches and shattered bark had been cleared away, new dens could be woven against its thick trunk. Until then, RiverClan's warriors slept in whatever shelter they could find, making nests in the thick sedge walls around the camp or in the nooks and crevices of the fallen tree. No cat could remember what it was like to be warm. Newleaf might be showing in early buds and birdsong, but leaf-bare frosts still gripped the banks of the river every night.

Hailstar had been sleeping in the open, despite the cold. He insisted that his den be the last one rebuilt. "When my Clan is safe and warm, then I will sleep soundly, but not before," he had vowed.

Oakkit wound around Stormkit, soaking water from his brother's pale tabby pelt into his own bracken-colored fur. "I told you to be careful."

"I wouldn't have fallen if that magpie hadn't dived at me," Stormkit growled through chattering teeth. The cold water seemed to have reached his bones.

"You wouldn't have fallen off if you'd stayed in the clearing." A deep mew sounded from behind them.

Stormkit spun around.

Hailstar was staring down at him, his thick gray pelt ruffled against the cold. Amusement lit the RiverClan leader's yellow eyes. "Shellheart!" He called to his deputy, not taking his eyes from Stormkit.

Shellheart slid out from the rushes, his wet pelt slicked against his strong frame. He glanced at Stormkit. "Is everything okay?"

"Your kit will be a brave warrior," Hailstar meowed. "If he doesn't drown himself before he starts his training."

Shellheart's tail flicked as Hailstar went on. "We'd better send a patrol to catch that magpie. It's beginning to think it owns RiverClan territory."

Shellheart dipped his head. "Should we drive it off or catch it?"

Hailstar wrinkled his nose. "We'd better catch it," he growled unenthusiastically. Few cats in RiverClan liked adding birds to the fresh-kill pile. "We must eat whatever we can find." The flood had killed so many fish—battered them on the rocks or left them stranded on land—that river prey was scarce.

"I'll organize a patrol," Shellheart meowed.

"Wait till Rippleclaw's patrol returns," Hailstar ordered. With so much rebuilding still to do in camp, Hailstar rarely sent out more than one patrol at a time.

"I hope they've caught something edible this time," Tanglewhisker muttered.

"I'm sure they will have," Birdsong meowed. "It's been a moon since the flood. The fish must be coming back by now."

Echomist turned away from her kits. "If only we'd buried some of the fish washed up by the flood, and preserved them like ThunderClan does with their prey in leaf-bare."

Hailstar shook his head. "Fish don't keep like forest prey. Our warriors will need the strength of StarClan to repair the damage done by the flood as well as keep the fresh-kill pile well stocked."

Stormkit stuck out his tail. "Let us help with the rebuilding, then."

Volekit hurried forward, his gray fur spiking with excitement. "Oh, yes, please!"

"We'll be really useful!" Petalkit fluffed out her tortoiseshell pelt.

Echomist swept her tail around her kits, pulling them away. "Don't be frog-brained. You'll get under everyone's paws."

Stormkit plucked at the ground. "No, we won't!"

Hailstar's whiskers twitched. "I'm not going to turn down a genuine offer of help, Echomist. As long as they stay in the camp, I don't see a problem. We'll have a kit patrol!"

Stormkit puffed out his chest as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Oakkit, Beetlekit, Volekit, and Petalkit. "Great! What should we do?"

Hailstar thought for a moment. "If you take the reeds that Ottersplash is gathering to Softpaw and Whitepaw, then Timberfur and Cedarpelt will be free to join Shellheart's hunting patrol."

"Come on!" Stormkit raced for the shore where Ottersplash was tossing reeds.

"Careful!" Cedarpelt was pawing together a freshly harvested pile as Stormkit skidded to a halt next to him. "Don't knock them into the river!"

"I won't!" Stormkit sank his teeth into a stem and began dragging it across the clearing to the apprentices' half-built den.

"Well, well." Whitepaw paused from weaving stems on the roof of the apprentices' den and looked down. "We have new volunteers."

"Is that a whole reed?" Softpaw peered from inside the framework of woven willow stems, her tabby-patched tail quivering. "We'll be finished before we know it with help like this."

"I can carry more," Stormkit boasted, puffed up with pride. He dropped the stem and turned away, nearly crashing into Beetlekit.

"Watch out!" mewed the black kit, tripping over the reed he was dragging.

"Sorry!" Stormkit dashed back toward the reed bed, past Volekit, who had three reeds clamped between his jaws. "I'm bringing four next time," he called over his shoulder.

He pricked his ears as he heard paws splash on the marshy earth beyond the entrance tunnel. A cat was racing toward the camp. Stormkit halted, blinking, as the sedge wall of the camp rustled and Rippleclaw pounded into the clearing.

"Any prey?" Birdsong called.

Rippleclaw shook his head, his silver flanks heaving. "Sunningrocks!" he gasped. "ThunderClan has taken Sunningrocks!"





## CHAPTER 2



*“ThunderClan!” Stormkit raced for the fallen tree, scrambled onto the trunk, and scooted back along the icy branch that stretched over the river. “Those snake-hearts!” He could see the scrawny pelts of ThunderClan warriors swarming like rats over the huge gray rocks that had always been RiverClan’s despite ThunderClan’s grasping claims.*

*“How dare they?”*

Stormkit heard his father’s growl and turned to see Shellheart leap up the trunk of the ancient willow and hurry along one of the low boughs that reached out over the water. The RiverClan deputy peered through the trailing branches. “I don’t believe it! Pinestar’s stretched out in the sunshine like it’s his territory!”

Stormkit saw a massive fox-red tom sprawling on the rocks, his soft belly fur glittering where it had brushed the frosty stone.

Rippleclaw paced the clearing, his black-and-silver fur spiked up. “They must think we’ve lost our teeth and claws!”

The sedge swished as Mudfur and Brightsky raced into camp. Piketooth followed, his tabby fur bristling, a fat carp skewered between his long front teeth. He dropped the fish and stared at Hailstar. “Who’s going to lead the battle patrol?”

Stormkit lashed his tail. Why couldn’t he be an apprentice already? Then he could join his Clanmates in driving the mangy ThunderClan cats off RiverClan territory.

“What’s going on?” Troutclaw padded stiffly out of the elders’ den. His gray tabby pelt was ruffled from sleep.

“There are ThunderClan warriors on Sunningrocks!” Stormkit called from his perch.

Hailstar swung his gaze around. “Get down from there, Stormkit,” he growled. “This isn’t a time for games.”

"I'm not playing!" Stormkit objected. But he backed along the branch and jumped down from the trunk.

Shellheart scrambled down from the willow and faced Hailstar. "Are we going to let those squirrel-chasers stay there?"

Rippleclaw growled. "They must know we can see them."

"Which means they'll be ready for us if we attack." Troutclaw padded down the slope. "How could we win a battle that they're more prepared for than we are?" He shook his matted head. "Haven't we lost enough?"

Stormkit wondered if the old tom was thinking of Duskwater. He'd heard Rainflower telling Echomist that the she-cat's body had never been found after the flood. "We'll win this time!" he mewed.

"Hush, Stormkit!" Shellheart snapped his head around.

Timberfur crossed the clearing, his eyes dark. "We might lose."

Cedarpelt joined Troutclaw and swept his tail sympathetically across the old cat's shoulder. "Sunningrocks has always been hard to defend."

Stormkit stiffened. "That's no reason to let ThunderClan have it!" He stepped back as Shellheart brushed in front of him, muffling his mew.

"You're too young for this debate," the RiverClan deputy warned.

Rainflower scooped Stormkit aside with her tail. "Hush, little one. You have a warrior's heart as brave as any cat's. You'll get your turn."

*You bet I will!* Stormkit shut his mouth and curled his claws. *One day I'll be leader and then I'll decide when we go into battle.*

"Ow!"

He felt a tail beneath his paws and turned to find Oakkit glaring at him.

"That's my tail you're digging your claws into!"

"Sorry!" Stormkit guiltily hopped off his brother's tail. "We have to punish those squirrel-chasers for stealing our territory, right?"

Oakkit didn't answer. He was watching Brambleberry. The white medicine cat had slid out from her den among the sedges.

"Do you think we should fight, Brambleberry?" Hailstar asked.

Brambleberry shook her head. "Not now. I have no way to treat battle wounds. The flood took my herbs and my store will stay empty till newleaf brings fresh crops. I can only use the most basic remedies."

"And we're half-starved," Troutclaw added.

Stormkit blinked. He hadn't been hungry. Rainflower always had enough milk for him and Oakkit. He studied his Clanmates and noticed for the first time how thin they were looking. Nearly as scrawny as ThunderClan cats.

Hailstar sighed. "I don't want to start a battle we are likely to lose. And I don't want warriors with injuries that can't be healed."

Rippleclaw lashed his tail. "Then we're just going to let them take as much territory as they want?"

"They only want Sunningrocks," Echomist pointed out. "They'd never try to cross the river."

Piketooth growled, "There's prey at Sunningrocks. Forest prey that could make up for the lack of fish." He kicked the carp lying at his paws. "It took all morning to catch this."

Echomist dipped her head. "But it's almost newleaf. It won't be long before we have more prey than we need. And right now I'd rather go hungry than lose

another Clanmate.” She glanced at Troutclaw.

Piketooth dug his claws into the earth. “Are we going to give up Sunningrocks without a murmur?”

“No.” Hailstar crossed the clearing and leaped onto the low branch of the willow. He glanced toward Sunningrocks. “Rippleclaw, Shellheart.” His tail swept the bark. “Take Ottersplash and Brightsky to Sunningrocks. Don’t fight. Tell Pinestar and his Clanmates that they may have Sunningrocks today. But warn them: Those rocks are RiverClan’s and we will defend them soon.”

“Don’t worry. Those snake-hearts will get the message!” Shellheart’s claws sprayed soft earth as he charged for the entrance tunnel with Rippleclaw, Brightsky, and Ottersplash pounding after.

“Quick!” As his Clanmates bunched into anxious, murmuring groups, Stormkit hissed in his brother’s ear and dashed back to the fallen tree. He scampered along the trunk, checking over his shoulder.

Oakkit was following. “Where are we going?”

“To watch.”

“Watch what?”

“We’re going to watch Shellheart tell Pinestar off!” Stormkit scampered along the branch. “Dig your claws in,” he warned his brother. “It’s slippery.”

When the branch grew thin enough to dip under his weight, Stormkit halted and ducked down to let Oakkit watch over his shoulder. Only four ThunderClan warriors remained on Sunningrocks. Pinestar was still lying on the smooth, flat rock, showing his belly to the leaf-bare sun. A bright ginger tom sat beside him, eyes closed, tail wrapped over his paws.

“That must be Sunfall, the deputy,” Oakkit whispered. “Volekit said he was ginger.”

Two lithe warriors paced back and forth beside the leader and deputy: a blue-gray tom and a mottled tabby. Their eyes were wide and their ears pricked. Suddenly the tabby halted and stared at the river.

Stormkit followed his gaze. Shellheart was swimming toward Sunningrocks. Water splashed as Rippleclaw, Brightsky, and Ottersplash plunged in after him. On Sunningrocks, the gray tom’s pelt had bristled along his spine. He darted to the edge of the rocks and showed his teeth, his gaze fixed on the RiverClan patrol.

Pinestar jumped to his paws, quickly followed by Sunfall. The four ThunderClan warriors lined up on the crest of the rock as Shellheart launched himself, dripping, from the water. In two bounds, the RiverClan deputy scaled the smooth cliff face. Sunfall arched his back and hissed as Shellheart approached. Pinestar narrowed his eyes.

Stormkit felt Oakkit tense behind him. “Will they fight?” Oakkit breathed.

“Wait.” Stormkit’s paws trembled with excitement as Rippleclaw leaped up onto Sunningrocks with Brightsky and Ottersplash following.

Stormkit pricked his ears, straining to hear.

“You’re on RiverClan territory,” Shellheart growled.

Sunfall took a step forward. “Make us leave, then.”

Shellheart flicked his tail. “This is not *yet* a battle worth fighting,” he meowed. He looked back toward the RiverClan camp, clearly visible through the leafless trees. “But we’ll be watching. You should watch out, too, because this is our land and we *will* defend it.”

The gray tom's lip curled. "But not today?"

Rippleclaw darted forward, flattening his ears. "If it comes to a battle," he hissed in the gray tom's face, "it'll be me who shreds you first."

"Rippleclaw!" Shellheart called the warrior back and met Pinestar's narrowed gaze. "You can have Sunningrocks for now. Help yourself to any fresh-kill you find here. RiverClan doesn't need mice. But we'll take it back when we want it back."

Stormkit could feel his brother's heart pounding. "Mangy mouse-eaters," he muttered. "Enjoy Sunningrocks while you can."

Shellheart jumped down to the riverbank and waited while Rippleclaw, Ottersplash, and Brightsky dived past him into the water. He glanced back up at the rock face once more before following his Clanmates.

"Watch out!" Oakkit's yelp made Stormkit jump. "The magpie's coming back!"

Stormkit looked up and saw a flash of black-and-white feathers outlined against the gray sky. "Hold on to me!" he ordered.

As Oakkit sank his claws into his pelt, Stormkit reared up on his hind legs. He lashed out at the magpie with his forepaws just as it swooped level with the branch. Held firm by Oakkit, Stormkit slashed again and again until he felt his claws slice through feather and reach flesh.

Squawking, the magpie wheeled away, and Stormkit dropped to four paws.

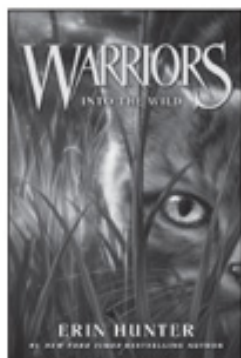
Oakkit let go and blinked at him. "Nice move!"

"Thanks for hanging on to me." Stormkit looked at the bloody feathers caught in his claws. "I don't think that magpie will be back for a while." He blinked triumphantly at his brother. "We're going to be the best warriors RiverClan's ever seen."

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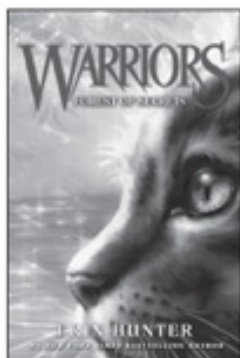
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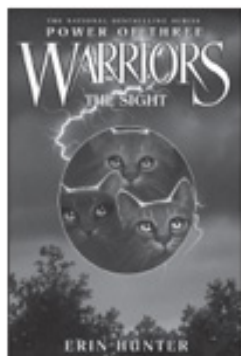
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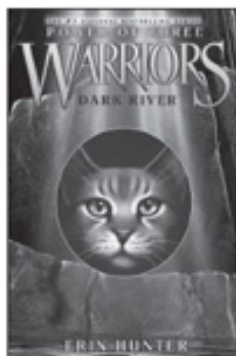
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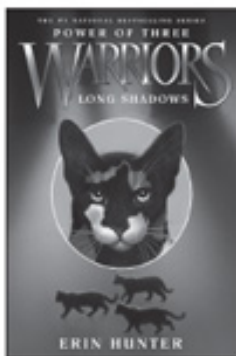
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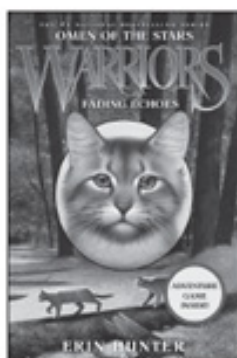
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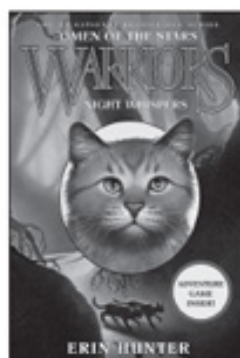
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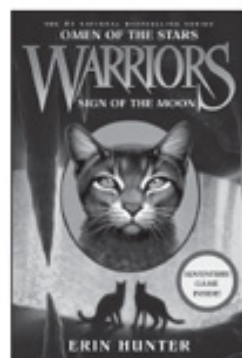
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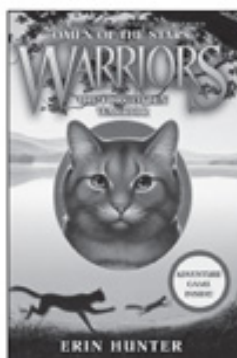
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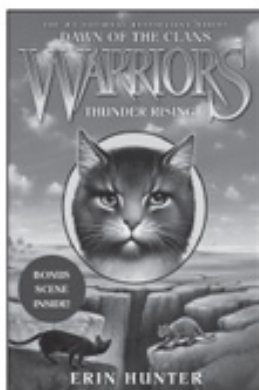
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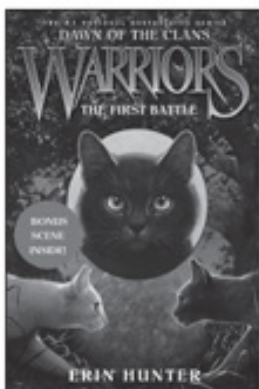
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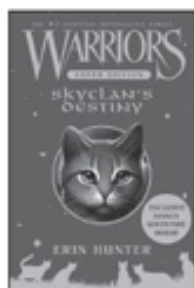
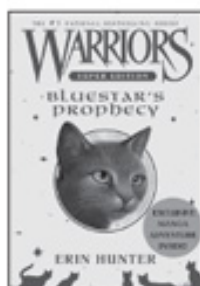
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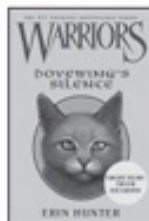
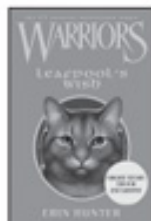
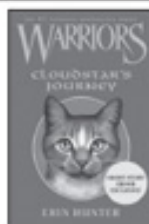
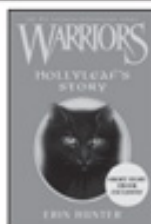


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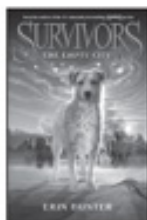
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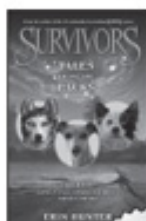
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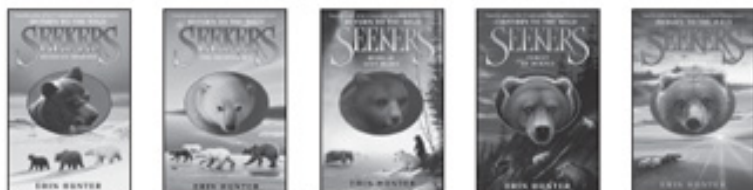
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**ERIN HUNTER** is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich, mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling *Survivors* and *Seekers* series.

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